THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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APRIL 40¢

NOMANSLAND
a novelet by
BRIAN W. ALDISS

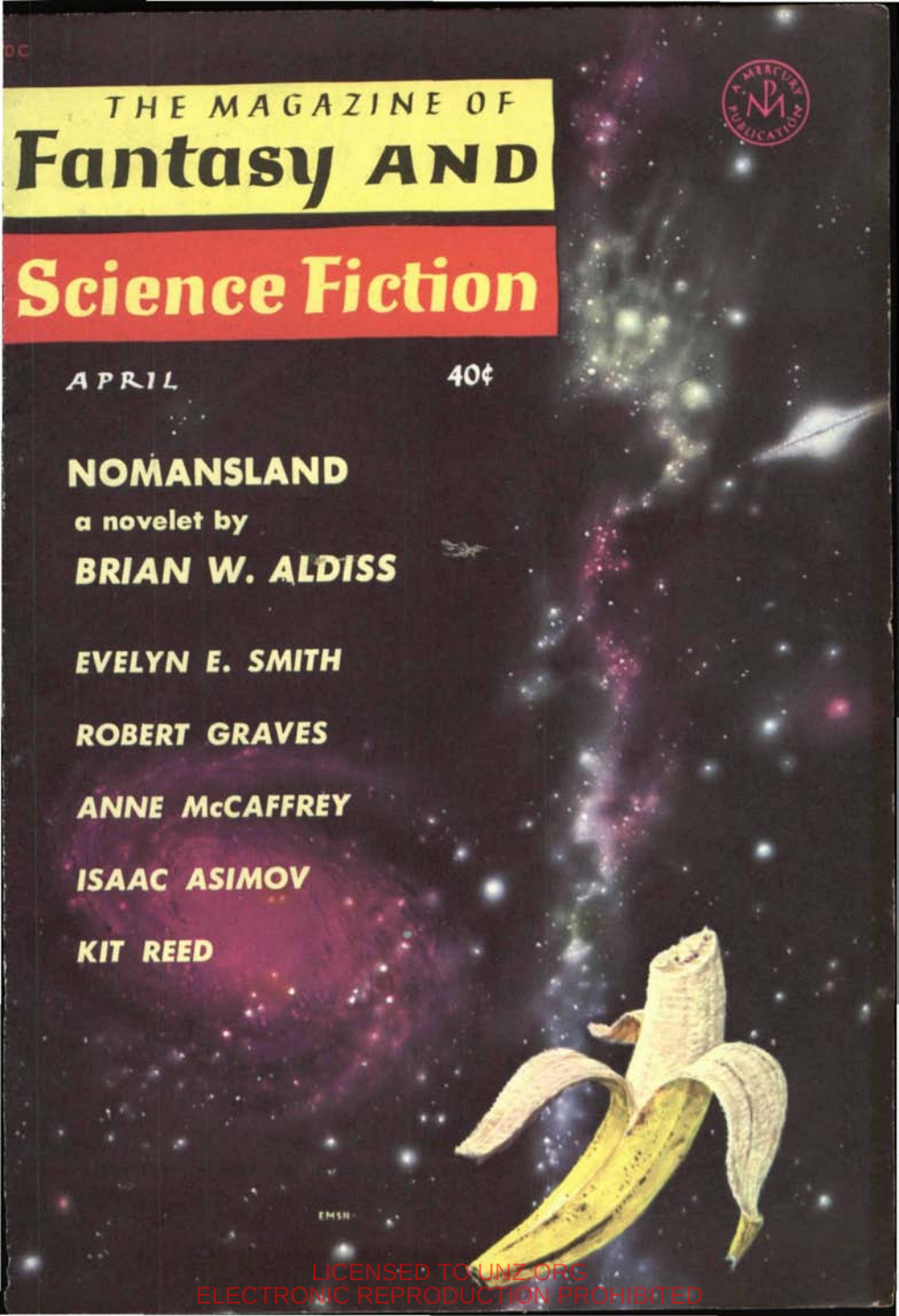
EVELYN E. SMITH

ROBERT GRAVES

ANNE McCAFFREY

ISAAC ASIMOV

KIT REED



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

APRIL — *Including Venture Science Fiction*

Softly While You're Sleeping	EVELYN E. SMITH	5
The Hills of Lodan	HAROLD CALIN	19
The Ship Who Sang	ANNE MCCAFFREY	35
Dead Man's Bottles	ROBERT GRAVES	52
Judas Bomb	KIT REED	65
Ferdinand Feghoot: XXXVIII	GRENDEL BRIARTON	73
Science: My Built-In Doubter	ISAAC ASIMOV	75
Books	ALFRED BESTER	86
Cosmic Sex and You	NILS PETERSON	89
Daddy's People	RICHARD BANKS	91
On Hearing Another Report . . . *(verse)*	DORIS PITKIN BUCK	98
Nomansland *(novelet)*	BRIAN W. ALDISS	99
In this issue . . . Coming next month		4
F&SF Market Place		130

Cover by Emsh

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER — *Robert P. Mills*, EDITOR

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In this issue . . .

It seems time to speak once more of conventions. . . . The most important, to science fiction aficionados, is the World Science Fiction Convention, held each Labor Day weekend. Last year, it was held in Pittsburg; the year before, in Detroit. West Coast personnel will be pleased to know that this year the scene shifts to Seattle. The official announcement follows: "The 19th World Science Fiction Convention, sponsored this year by the Seattle Science Fiction Club, will be held September 2, 3 & 4, 1961. Robert A. Heinlein has consented to be the official Guest of Honor; John W. Campbell Jr. will also be featured on the program. The Convention will be held at the recently completed Hyatt House. Advance Convention memberships are $2 per person, with an additional $1 registration fee to be collected at the Convention. Send inquiries to Seattle Science Fiction Club, Box 1365, Broadway Branch, Seattle 2, Washington."

If you don't want to go that far, or wait so long, the Eleventh Annual MidWesCon will be held at the North Plaza Motel, 7911 Reading Rd., Cincinnati, Ohio, June 23-25. Make reservations directly with the motel, or write Lou Tabakow, 39543 St. John's Terrace, Cincinnati 36, Ohio. . . .

As you may not have known, because of several requests lifetime subscriptions to Fantasy and Science Fiction are now available at the ridiculously low price of $50. A Certified Life Underwriter of our acquaintance reports that this is a particularly sound buy for any male of fifty or under, and an even better buy for a female of fifty or younger (a tautology, that; there aren't any females *over* fifty, are there?). Address: J. W. Ferman, Publisher, Fantasy & Scinece Fiction, 580 Fifth Ave., N.Y. 36, N.Y.

Coming next month . . .

"Final Muster," by Rick Rubin, about a standing army of the future which was kept in stasis until such time as it might be needed, "Adapted," by Carol Emshwiller, "The Teeth of Despair, by Avram Davidson and Sidney Klein (recommended particularly to underpaid professors everywhere), and a variety of others. . . .

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"I despise cheap symbolism," Anna said, "even in a vampire . . ."

SOFTLY WHILE YOU'RE SLEEPING

by Evelyn E. Smith

"LET'S NOT TAKE A CAB," ANN proposed, as they came out of the coffee shop. "Let's walk; it's only ten blocks or so. Or don't you like walking?"

Tom squeezed her arm. "Doll, I'm a country boy. Walked ten miles every day through roaring blizzards and raging hurricanes and all that jazz just to get myself an education. But I never expected to find a city girl who liked to walk. Don't tell me you like to cook, too?" He grinned down at her. "Or am I asking too much?"

"Much too much!" Ann hated cooking, and the truth was she hated walking, too. On a blistering hot night like that, the prospect was—well—not sheer horror, because she knew what that could be like, but bad enough. She wasn't masochistic, but it was just after midnight, and, if they walked, they might run into Mr. Varri starting on his nightly rounds. She was desperately anxious to meet him face to face. If Tom was with her, she wouldn't be afraid . . . anyhow, she'd be less afraid.

"You must live right by the river," Tom observed, as they pushed further and further east. "One of those big new luxury apartment houses, eh?"

"I live a block away from the river. But not in a new house."

"They've done a nice job converting some of those old mansions," he said.

She smiled. When they reached the cobbled street with its two rows of white-trimmed black brick tenements, it was empty, and the incandescent moonlight bathing it only emphasized its desolation. Mr. Varri must have gone already.

"Cobblestones in New York—can you beat that?" Tom said wonderingly. And he shivered, though perspiration was streaking his ruddy face. "They ought to do something, though—plant some trees or *something!* It looks . . . dead. What kind of people would want to live in a place like this?"

"People like me, for instance," she said, stopping in front of one of the black brick houses.

"Gosh, Ann I—I'm sorry; I—"

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And suddenly something swooped down at them from overhead. Tom pushed her violently up the steps and into the tiny vestibule. "Those things can be dangerous!" His voice was shaking.

And her laugh was cracked. "Some country boy—afraid of a bird!"

He glanced over his shoulder, through the protecting glass of the outer door. "That wasn't a bird," he said. "It was a bat."

She had known, of course, but she had to keep on pretending to herself. "I thought bats were really harmless, afraid of people?"

"Normally, they are. A bat wouldn't come as close to people as that, not after dark, anyway, unless it was rabid . . ."

"I don't think it's rabid," Ann said.

A door down the hall creaked open; Mrs. Brumi's moon face glimmered from the shadows. "Sorry if we disturbed you, ma'am," Tom said, giving her the boyish-charm smile full-voltage. She stared at him expressionlessly.

"What on earth was that?" Tom demanded, as they started up the narrow stairs.

Ann waited until they'd climbed two flights before she answered, "My landlady. She worries about my morals, disapproves of my friends, and what can I do? She comes from the same tribe as my father."

"Tribe!" Tom squeaked.

"In Albania, *tribe* is just a word to—well—group people who come from the same part of the country. And everybody who lives in the same part is likely to be connected somehow." She wasn't being entirely truthful. A tribe was a tribe.

"Relatives can be hell," Tom agreed. "You ought to see my aunt Nonie—a real kook if ever there was one."

Ann lived on the third floor. Her apartment was in almost opulent contrast to the rest of the house, and she had come to expect a gasp of surprise from newcomers, as she switched on the light. "Well," Tom said. "We-ell, you really do have this place fixed up; you'd almost think . . ."

". . . you were in one of the new luxury apartment houses . . . ?" she finished for him.

He flushed. "Ann, I didn't mean—Honestly, I didn't realize — All the fellows said you must be making at least. . . ." His regular-featured face took on an exalted expression; he was posing for a statue—Champion of Women's Rights. "I didn't dream the firm paid women so much less than men. It's a darned shame."

"My salary isn't too bad. I just don't believe in spending money on rent." Then she smiled. "I'll go make us something cold to drink. First I'll turn on the fans, though; it's stifling here." She had two

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fans, one at each end of the apartment, but though both sets of wings beat the air energetically, it remained always hot and stagnant.

"Keep on plugging; someday you'll have enough saved up to get an air-conditioner," he laughed, as she went into the kitchen. Then he was embarrassed again. "Hell, Ann," he called in after her, "I don't make so much money myself." She knew he didn't—less than half of what she herself made.

She started taking out ice, enjoying the cold touch of the cubes on her warm, sticky fingers. He came into the kitchen behind her. "What on earth is that?" he demanded, staring.

"A bathtub," Ann said composedly. "Lots of the old houses have bathtubs in the kitchen. Someday I'll get a stall shower put in." She handed him a glass. "How are you on plumbing?"

He looked surprised. "I don't know; I never tried."

"No good," she decided.

They went back to the living room. Tom punctiliously waited until she sat on the couch before he seated himself beside her. "I don't want to sound officious, Ann," he said, "but I don't think this is a good place for a girl living alone. Even if a relative of yours does own the house, the street isn't safe."

"Mrs. Brumi is not a relative of mine," she said emphatically. "And the street's safe enough. This is the East Side. It's over on the West Side that they have the street gangs and the muggings. Here, you hardly ever see anyone late at night."

"Oh, it's quiet, all right," he agreed, picking up his drink. His Adam's apple moved up and down contentedly as he swallowed. Then he transferred the drink to his other hand, and, moving closer on the couch, put the liberated hand—and the arm attached to it—around her waist. "Listen, doll, you probably think I have a hell of a nerve coming fresh from the hinterlands and starting to tell you how to run your life, but sometimes somebody from the outside can get a more objective look at things, if you know what I mean. I still say this isn't the kind of place a girl like you should be living in, and I don't mean the safety bit. Appearances are pretty important these days; no matter how nicely you've fixed up your apartment, the house is squalid—you can't get away from that. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if part of the reason you're not making the money a girl in your position ought to is because you're living like this, so the firm feels you don't have the top-executive outlook."

Now the boyish smile was for her alone. "Don't misunderstand me, doll. It doesn't matter at all

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about your folks' being Albanian. The only thing is, you've got to work twice as hard to prove you have the real American viewpoint."

He took another swallow of his drink. "You don't have to go out on a financial limb to live decently. If you teamed up with another nice girl, you could move into one of those efficiency apartments a lot of the better buildings are renting. Sure, you'd have less space, but you'd have modern plumbing, air-conditioning, *and* an address you'd be proud of. The whole deal probably wouldn't run you more than a few extra dollars each month, and you'll find it'll be worth every cent of it. . . ."

Something flopped against the window. "It's the bat!" she shrieked. "It's trying to get in! Do something, Tom!"

"For Pete's sake; it couldn't get through the screens, even if it wanted to." His arm tightened. "And this is a hell of a time to be talking about bats. How about dousing those lights, doll? They make the place even hotter."

"Look out of the window," she urged. "See if it is the bat."

He sighed, and then laughed. "Okay, little girl, anything to make you feel better." He strolled over to the window. "Must've been the wind," he reported. "Not a thing in sight."

"Not a thing?"

"There's a man out there. But I thought bats were what you were interested in."

"What kind of man?" she insisted.

"Tall, young, good-looking—if you like the Valentino type." He laughed comfortably, sure that she didn't. "He's wearing a T-shirt and slacks. They look white, but it could be the moonlight. Sensible fellow—wish I'd dressed that way myself." He grinned, because you didn't go to the theatre in T-shirt and slacks, not unless you sat in the balcony. "Very clean type," he finished kindly.

"It must be Mr. Varri."

"Is that so?" Tom flung his thick body heavily beside her. He took his drink in his right hand and her left breast in his left. "Now, where were we . . . ?"

It never gets too hot for them, she thought smoulderingly.

It had been a burningly hot night when she first saw Mr. Varri. She couldn't sleep, and she was sitting by the window, hoping for a breeze from the river. He came walking down the street; in his T-shirt and slacks, he could have been anybody—from one of the tenements on the block or one of the "luxury" houses by the river. His face was pale and sad. He meant nothing to her, and soon after she fell asleep.

She was awakened by whistling outside. She got up and looked out of the window. It

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wasn't light yet; he was coming back along the cobblestones. He was less immaculate, but still very clean. There was a rosy joy in his face. Whatever he does, he can't have been working hard, she thought fretfully. But it was obvious that he hadn't been at work. He was either a lover or a criminal; she hoped a criminal and that he would be caught, not because of whatever else he might have done, but because he had robbed her of her sleep; she'd never be able to get back to it again that night. She sat at the window, watching a thick pink dawn spread stickily over the street, trying to remember the name of the tune he had been whistling.

When she came downstairs later that morning, Mrs. Brumi was mopping the front steps. "I want to get finished with this before it gets too hot," she said, wiping sweat from her forehead. "You look tired, Anna; heat getting you?"

Only the middle-aged and the old let themselves be "gotten" by the heat. "It's because I haven't had enough sleep. Four o'clock in the morning, a man came walking down the street, whistling as if he were the only one in the world!"

"Some people got no consideration!" Mrs. Brumi agreed.

"He was dressed all in white," Ann said, wondering now why this should have seemed sinister to her the night before.

"Sounds like Mr. Varri; he works in one of the hospitals. Lives in Mrs. Lugat's place." Mrs. Brumi gave Ann a sly look. "A nice boy—clean and polite and quiet. And he comes from the old country, Anna, from the hills like your papa."

Ann wished Mrs. Brumi wouldn't call her *Anna*. But Mrs. Brumi had known her ever since she was born. Ann's family hadn't lived in Mrs. Brumi's house, but further down the street, in a house that had been torn down later to make room for the luxury apartments Tom admired. Ann had been still quite little when her family moved up to Washington Heights, to a steam-heated apartment with a private bathroom and a refrigerator that made its own ice. "But we can find all of these things in this neighborhood," Ann's father had complained. "Why must we move so far away?"

"I want my family to have a nice place to live in," her mother had said. "Even more, I don't want them to grow up in this neighborhood." Ann's mother had come from Tirana; she didn't like the hill people.

Time passed. Anna had gone to college and become Ann. Her parents had died, and she'd come back to the old neighborhood. The law had required Mrs. Brumi to put steam heat in her flats and install private toilets; having gone so far, she had put in electric re-

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frigerators also. Rents were three times as high as they'd been when Anna was little, but they were still less than half that of most other apartments. They were in great demand, but Mrs. Brumi had given Ann preference.

The neighborhood had changed. The old-country people were still there, lurking implacably behind drawn blinds, but new-country people had moved in among them, interesting and Bohemian people—artists and actors and musicians and doctors from the nearby hospitals. Mrs. Brumi couldn't seem to get it through her head that Ann was now one of the interesting people and had no more old-country ties. She criticized everything Ann did. "Why do you want to fix up your apartment all arty-smarty? It's like paint on the face of an old lady; no matter how much she puts on, you can still see a hag underneath. When you get yourself a husband who makes a good salary, you'll move to a nice house in Long Island and fix it up. Silly to make this place like a department store, the way those arty-smarty pigs do." The arty-smarty pigs, of course, being the actors and artists and musicians.

She had commented freely and adversely upon the young men who came to help Ann paint walls and put up bookshelves. "They're not the kind of boys I'd like my daughters to go out with. . . . If they were still looking for husbands, of course," she added smugly. Her daughters had all been old-country-type girls and had made solid old-country-type marriages; one had even landed a dentist.

"I'm only saying this for your own good, Anna, but those boy friends of yours look like scum. They look like the kind that don't have any respect for a young girl. You can do better than them at least, Anna. You're not bad-looking, even if you are too skinny. All right, so maybe you don't have a dowry, but you've got a steady job."

Mrs. Brumi also disapproved of the long stretches when there were no young men at all, and Ann sat home evenings, reading and listening to her hi-fi. "That's no life for a young girl, specially when she isn't so very young any more and hasn't time to sit and wait. Now, I know a nice young man whose folks come from Scutari. He's a widower with a nice little butcher shop of his own. His mama lives with him and she'd be taking care of the two little boys, so he wouldn't stop you if you wanted to keep on working. . . ."

At this point, Ann had exploded, and told Mrs. Brumi firmly to mind her own business. Mrs. Brumi's broad face hadn't changed expression, but she stopped dropping in on Ann with

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fattening old-country dishes and nauseating old-country advice. Ann supposed she ought to be thankful that the old woman did no more now than call her by her first name. She had a feeling, though, that Mrs. Brumi was only quiescent, and that soon she'd erupt again with another small Albanian businessman.

However, Ann couldn't make herself move away. She'd already put too much into the apartment —not money but lots of time and taste. She'd never be able to get one as cheap anywhere else, and she needed her money for the costly annual winter vacations, the clothes from Bonwit's and Saks', and the warm, comfortable bank account.

Yet evenings, in the drenching heat of her apartment, self-doubts started to come at about the same time as darkness. Maybe the scheme of things she'd worked out for herself wasn't perfect; maybe an air-conditioner would be a better investment than a trip to Bermuda. She hadn't really enjoyed herself in Miami, the winter before, or in Mexico City, before that. She'd met young men, but she couldn't meet them on their own terms. Looks and clothes weren't enough—a girl had to be a slut also. Maybe there was something of the old country left in her, she thought.

It was foolish, she knew, not to give up one vacation for an air-conditioner. That didn't mean giving up the plan of things. She could go to Bermuda the year after. But she was afraid—break one link and the whole chain of dreams would fall apart.

The second night she saw Mr. Varri was even hotter than the first. She hadn't even tried to go to sleep but sat at her window, greedily sucking at an imaginary breeze. He came down the street, pale-faced and sad, his feet almost noiseless on the cobblestones. But the hospitals are all in the other direction, she thought. Not necessarily all, she reassured herself; there might be others.

When she fell asleep, her dreams were unlike any she'd ever had before. They would have been nightmares, but the necessary terror was lacking. Mr. Varri woke her up again just before dawn, singing the same tune he'd whistled the night before. The words brought recognition; her father sung it sometimes, and it always made her mother angry—why, Anna never knew. It seemed so silly and harmless; the words the same as in a thousand other folksongs. So, although Mr. Varri wasn't singing in English, she understood him. . . .

Do not cry, my dearest one,
There is no need for weeping.
Happiness I'll bring to you,
Softly while you're sleeping. . . .

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As he passed beneath her window, he looked up, directly at where she was standing, and she felt awareness come alive between them, although she knew it was her imagination; he couldn't possibly see her in the darkness. Yet he smiled and moved his hand in a diffident wave. Mrs. Brumi must have told him about me, she assured herself. But she crossed her arms across her chest to cover the thin nightgown and the strap held up by a safety-pin, because his face looked as if he saw her quite clearly.

The next morning she deliberately sought out Mrs. Brumi. "That man—the one you said must be Mr. Varri—woke me up again. He was singing, and so loud it's a wonder the whole street didn't wake up. Can't you ask Mrs. Lugat to speak to him?"

"I didn't hear nothing," Mrs. Brumi said. "And I sleep to the front."

"But you must have heard," Ann insisted. "It was so loud."

Mrs. Brumi shook her stolid head. "Girls who aren't married think their dreams are real. . . ."

The nasty, lying old bitch, Ann thought. She's just getting even because I told her to mind her own business. On her way to work, she met several people whom she knew slightly. All of them lived on the street; none of them had heard any singing in the night.

After that, he sang every night as he came home, sang until the glass in all the windows on the street should have quivered and angry heads come popping out. But no one seemed to hear; it was as if his voice existed only in her head. She was eager to see him by daylight, to speak to him, not to stop his singing, but to have him assure her that he had sung. She never saw a sign of him.

One morning she went boldly into Mrs. Lugat's house and pressed the bell marked "Varri." When there was no answer, she tugged at the inner door—often the buzzers didn't work—but it was locked. Mrs. Lugat was there, behind the glass, tall, gaunt, with an incongruous red smile painted on her bony face. "Can I help you?"

"I—I wanted to speak to Mr. Varri," Ann said, clutching her handbag with claw fingers, wondering, in a panic, what she could possibly say to him.

"My tenants all work at night," Mrs. Lugat told her. "They don't like to be disturbed daytimes. Come back after dark, and I'll let you in."

When Ann came back to the house that evening, Mrs. Brumi gave her a gap-toothed grin. "I'm glad you went to see Mr. Varri," she said. "He's a shy boy—he needs encouragement."

"You said he came from the old country!" Ann stormed. "How

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could he? There hasn't been any travel between the United States and Albania for years. It's behind the Iron Curtain. How could he get here?"

Mrs. Brumi's smile broadened. "Maybe he flew," she suggested.

Mr. Varri seemed to be very much encouraged. All night he sang under her window, and she was afraid to try to go to sleep, afraid he might work his way into her dreams. . . .

You sit and long for one true love,
While true love you're denying,
The only kind of love that's true
Is the love that is undying. . . .

But maybe the translation wasn't quite right, she thought; maybe it should have been "the love of the undying." Maybe that was why her mother had hated the song.

What would they have done about this in the old country? Probably gone to an exorcist; and, in the new country . . . an analyst. But analysts were so expensive; besides, she wasn't sure they could cope with fantasies outside the mind.

She'd thought Tom would help, simply by being so solid and real. But he was a little too much of both. She looked at the hay-colored hair mown close to his blocky head and sprouting thickly on his soft-muscled arms, at the circles of sweat under the nylon shirt sleeves—for he'd taken off his coat. And she knew that he was as clean and sanitized and deodorized as a man could be, because odors were part of appearances. But it was a hot night, and he was a man.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" he asked petulantly. "I thought New York girls were supposed to be—well—broad-minded, and, hell, you're worse than the chicks back home." He took hold of her again. "Don't you like me, doll?" he asked throatily. "Am I so hard to take?"

"I do like you, Tom," she said, trying to make her pulling away look more like a retreat than a reflex. "But it's so hot, and that thing flopping at the window . . ."

"It's been gone for ages." She didn't say anything. His voice rose. "The fellows at the office told me you were . . . funny, but I couldn't believe it; you didn't look like that kind of a girl to me. Now, I'm beginning to wonder."

She looked at him. He averted his eyes. "Ann, honestly, I didn't mean anything like that. I—oh, hell, why are you acting like this, then?"

She was no longer under any obligation to placate him. "Have you ever thought that perhaps

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you're not the most irresistible man in the world."

"But—but all the other fellows said you were the same with them."

"I'm glad to see you do such a thorough job of research before embarking on a new project," she said. "You should go far. Out that door, to begin with."

He got up, his face a fiery red. "For Pete's sake, Ann . . ." But it wasn't she he was upset about. He had fumbled the ball; he had goofed; he had failed to live up to his own picture of himself.

"Good-night, Tom." The door crashed shut. Then it opened a little way, and his head came apologetically through the aperture. "Sorry, I didn't mean to slam it, but the wind—Ann, I truly am sor—"

"For God's sake go!" She almost pushed him down the stairs. "A storm's coming up; you wouldn't want to get caught in it and spoil that pretty new silk suit."

Watching from the window, she saw him come out into the empty street. Not quite empty . . . as he walked west, something swooped out of the shadows and fluttered after him. Yes, I'm . . . funny, she thought. And I have funny acquaintances.

Lightning streaked the sky; thunder crashed, and the rain did come, in wild sweet gusts. She slept peacefully and comfortably. When Mr. Varri's singing awakened her just before dawn, the rain had stopped, and it was cooler. She looked down from her window, and he grinned up at her, with a face that was darkly handsome, and, at the same time, curiously innocent. His shining immaculacy was gone; great dark stains marred the whiteness of his clothes. "Mud," she said to herself, "just mud . . ." She began to giggle.

Tom didn't come to the office the next day. "He's in the hospital," Bill Cullen, the sales manager, Tom's boss, told her.

"Oh, poor Tom." She tried to sound convincingly surprised and regretful. "Awfully sudden, wasn't it? I hope it's nothing serious."

"He was attacked, or something, last night. Got his throat slashed." And Bill looked at her curiously. "He had a date with you, didn't he?"

"Do you think I'm that desperate?" Bill's face took on a "this is no joking matter" expression. She changed her tack. "And how do you happen to know I had a date with him?"

He turned pink. "Well, he just happened to mention to a few of the fellows that he was taking you to see *Gypsy*."

She could almost hear Tom's confident voice: "So you guys couldn't make any headway with her, eh? Well, maybe we country boys can teach you city fellows a

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trick or two. . . ." She choked back unseemly laughter. "He was all right when he left my place," she said demurely. "I suppose it must have happened on his way back."

"Looks like it." Bill ran a hand through his thinning crew cut. "But what's funny is he says he's not coming back here afterward. He's quitting. Just like that. And he seemed so happy here, so anxious to get ahead."

"Big city must've been too much for him," she said, and she wondered dreamily what the doctors at the hospital had made of the marks on Tom's throat.

That night the bat hovered outside her window, plaintively begging, "Please let me in, Anna. Please. . . ."

She wasn't afraid any more. "That would be very foolish of me," she told him calmly, "after what you did to Tom." But she doubted that Tom had invited him either, so why did Mr. Varri ask her permission? Was it because he came from the same tribe as her father . . . or because she was a woman?

"It's because I love you, Anna. That Tom, he was just food; all I wanted from him was his blood, and that I did not need to ask for. I took what I wanted, and I hurt him because he hurt you. But with you, Anna, it is different. I want your love; so I can come to you only if you ask me. Ask me, Anna, please ask me; I will show you a happiness greater than you have ever dreamed could be possible."

For three nights she held out against him, but, on the fourth, she moved slowly through a fog that seemed to swirl around the room and took out the screen. The black wings swooped in, beating the air into coolness, fluttering against her cheeks in a caress. "I love you, Anna; don't fear me."

Her body relaxed into trembling quietness; her throat throbbed expectantly even before she felt the prickle of the two tiny sharp teeth gently piercing the thin skin, gently drawing out her blood and, with it, her fears and anxieties and self-doubts. This *is* love, she thought wonderingly as her throat swelled to meet the vampire's kiss—a true kiss, not the clumsy suction of damp lips and the thrust of slimy tongue, not the disgusting fumble of sweating, odorous human bodies. She wanted it to go on until every drop of blood was drained from her body, leaving her utterly clean, utterly pure.

"No, no, not yet," she moaned, as the pressure started to slacken. Reaching out, she tried to grasp the wings, but they eluded her.

"No more tonight, dearest," he whispered. "It would be too dangerous for you. But I will come to you again tomorrow night . . . and every night."

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All day at the office she sat surrounded by filing cabinets and telephones and typewriters, dictating letters and memorandums and making decisions with her body, while her mind dreamed of the night that had passed and the night that was to come. Through her fog, she heard little secretaries talking ecstatically about their dates that evening. For the first time in her life, she had a date she was looking forward to; for the first time in her life she had tasted ecstacy. . . .

Night after night, the vampire returned to bring her all the happiness he had promised—and more. As the days and night passed, she changed, but she wasn't aware of it, or that the change was visible, not until the day Bill Cullen came into her office and asked if she were free that evening . . . Bill, who had dated her several times when he'd first joined the firm; then became merely an office friend.

He had to ask twice before his words filtered through the golden fog that insulated her all the time now. "Sorry, Bill," she murmured. "I'm busy tonight. I'm busy every night. . . ."

"You're in love," he told her. "There's something about you, something different. You're softer, more—more human, more like a woman."

She wasn't angry or annoyed or . . . anything. "Yes, I am in love." She knew that the word had no real meaning for him, and she did feel a faint emotion—pity.

He looked at her. "Better watch yourself, kid. Don't overdo it. You look wonderful, but you don't look good, if you know what I mean."

The one thing the fog couldn't completely insulate her from was vanity. She went and looked at herself in the washroom mirror. She had always been pale and slender and pretty; now she was chalk-white, gaunt . . . and beautiful. But it was a distinctly necrotic loveliness. Shock began to grow in her, dissipating the fog. Almost with clarity, she started wondering what would happen when all the blood had been drained out of her.

That evening, when she got home, she was close to being awake for the first time in days. "I'm so glad everything's turning out so nice for you, Anna!" Mrs. Brumi was beaming from the doorstep.

Ann looked at her, unable to put the questions she wanted to ask into words. "It won't be long," Mrs. Brumi said reassuringly.

The words came, then, and, with them, the fears—new fears piled upon the old. "It won't be long until what? Until I'll be of no use to him any more? Until I'm—" and still that was the lesser horror—"dead."

Mrs. Brumi looked appalled.

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"What a thing to say, Anna! Of course you won't be dead. You just won't be alive—that's all."

That's all. Ann was becoming her old bitter self. "What will happen then? Will he buy that house in Long Island, so we'll have a nice place to keep our coffins?"

"You can't expect that, Anna. For a skinny girl who isn't so young and who hasn't any dowry, it's a good match. And there's always room in Mrs. Lugat's house."

"The bride was white," Ann said hysterically, "and a coffin was her dowry." And this is how folksongs start. How had she let herself slip into this? Calm Ann, cool Ann, collected Ann? She was lonely and romantic and she had the heritage . . . but that was no reason to have let herself go primitive. She should have known better than to accept a fantasy love. Of course it was more beautiful than a real love; otherwise fantasies would never have come into being. Weakness made them real, and she had let herself be weak, but, essentially, she knew, she was strong.

That night the vampire sobbed and pleaded outside her window. She wanted to let him in, but she rehardened her heart against him. "Why, Anna, why?" he moaned. "I love you so much. I thought you loved me."

"I do. But when all my blood is gone, then you won't love me any more."

"Of course I will!" he told her eagerly. "You'll become like me, then. We'll always be together. We'll go out every night, and, after we've drunk our fill, we'll dance together high above Central Park in the silvery moonlight."

"But you'll never be able to drink my blood again; you'll never be able to love me again."

"Of course I will love you, Anna—only in a different way. Love changes after marriage. Even for the others it does."

"Their kind of love isn't love. You taught me that."

"Anna," he wept, beating his head against the screen, "you can't leave me now; you can't leave me alone again. It's wrong; we are betrothed."

"This isn't the old country," she said, angry that he should take so much for granted. "In America, people make love casually, without being betrothed."

"But how could their kind of love be anything but casual? Our kind could never be. Anna, come with me. I'll give you your heart's desires, though you may not know them. . . ."

She thought of going out night after night and feeding on the coarse thick throats of strangers. Disgusting, she thought; what love could survive that? "Look," she said coldly, "my parents didn't come from the old country and work like slaves to give me a

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decent home and a good education so I should wind up spending my days in a coffin and my nights going out sucking people's blood."

He beat his wings frantically. "But, Anna, all the time you've been living in a coffin. By making you one of the undead, I am bringing you to life—"

Her tone was even chillier. "I despise cheap symbolism," she said, "even in a vampire."

He couldn't understand; his concern was only for himself. "Anna," he wept, "Anna, I'm so alone. I love you so much. Have pity on me—don't go away from me."

But she left him. The next day she rented another apartment—on the West Side, where luxury apartments were cheaper, because it was unfashionable. However, it was on West Seventy-second Street, which is a broad, well-lit thoroughfare, full of patisseries and quite safe. And it wasn't only to save money that she moved across town; it was to be as far as she could get from the old neighborhood while still being conveniently situated with respect to her office.

She didn't give Mrs. Brumi notice, because she didn't want to give her time to hatch any new plots; she paid her a month's rent instead. And she hired professional packers; so the whole operation could be over in a day, and she wouldn't have to spend another night in the apartment. Not that she was afraid of Mr. Varri—she knew he wouldn't hurt her but of herself.

The new apartment was completely air-conditioned, so she would never need to open the windows. But sometimes, late at night, over the hum of the machinery, she thought she heard something flapping against the windows, and a tiny desperate voice singing . . .

Do not weep my dearest one,
There is no need for weeping.
Happiness I'll bring to you,
Softly while you're sleeping.

The words were appropriate now, because sometimes she found herself quite openly in tears. Just the same, she didn't open the windows. She was strong.

It took a long time for the marks on her neck to heal. But it was easy to hide them with tight wide necklaces, which were expensive, because everything she put on her body had to be of good quality. However, she got a new boy friend who was a jeweller, and, while he lasted, she got substantial discounts.

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The young subaltern showed himself to be a coward on Lodan; of course, with a proper trophy he might be able to convince himself that he had performed reasonably and well, once he returned to safe Earth.

THE HILLS OF LODAN

by Harold Calin

IT WAS AN HOUR AFTER DARK now and they sat close by the fire. They had not spoken since they returned. Although operating procedure dictated that all personnel be restricted to interior compounding in alien areas after dark, still they remained outside. The interior areas as described and called for by the manual actually did not exist here. There were only three light dural huts, one of which served to house the survey gear, the two others as sleeping quarters. None of the three by the fire was sleepy. Too much had happened. There was, too, just the idea of being outdoors, even if it was on an alien world. It was a luxury too great to resist after fourteen weeks in space.

Of the three men who sat by the fire, one was quite dark-skinned and much bigger than the two others. He wore the same uniform as the others, the tan of the Pioneer Brigades, but a strip above the brigade patch bore the name "Mars." He wore the brevets of the rank of first subaltern as did one of the other two, who were Earthmen. The third man, the youngest, was a new subaltern on his first tour of duty. The dark man, whose name was Dekker Barents, put his dinner plate on the ground.

"You want me to light you a cigarette, Harry?" he said.

"No," the one called Harry said.

"How's the arm?"

"I'll live." He had managed his dinner with one hand, holding the plate between his knees. He felt the arm now. The pain was lessening, and he felt the pain only because he thought about it.

The third man, the young subaltern, who had not spoken at all, stood.

"Aren't you going to have any dinner, Robert?" Dekker asked him.

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He said nothing.

"You should eat something," Harry said.

"I'm not hungry," Robert Leader said. He sat down again.

Dekker looked at Harry. "What did you tell Stone?" he asked.

"I told him we made contact," Harry Jackson said.

"And?"

"And nothing. That's all we did."

Robert Leader looked up. "Did you tell him what happened?"

"No," Harry said. "What did happen?"

"Nothing," Robert said. "Nothing happened."

Dekker laughed then, and Harry Jackson looked at him quickly.

They were quiet for a time, then, and Harry smoked a cigarette and looked at the small hand axe lying on the ground next to Robert Leader.

"That could be an ancient American Indian hatchet," Harry said. "Except for what it's made of. I think they called them tomahawks."

"I'm tired," Robert said, and he stood again. He picked up the axe and walked away from the fire. He had sat with the men to whom he had shown himself very obviously, earlier that day, to be a coward, and he had thought that if he sat with them now, something would make it all right. But nothing had happened, and he got up and left. He had not eaten because he knew that if he did, he would be sick.

Earlier that day he had been with Harry and Dekker Barents into the hills beyond the perimeter to make contact with the aliens whose fire they had seen the night before. It had been a long expedition, in the almost unbearable heat of the twin suns of this world, and they had not returned until just before dark. Robert now entered one of the dural huts, placed the axe on the ground under his bunk, and lay down. He stared at the ceiling and knew that he would not be able to sleep.

Harry Jackson had never seen a planet like this before, and in the beginning it was a very great and quiet thing. But they had been there fifteen days now, this team taking cores from a fourth camp site already, and the almost lunar landscape was no longer very great, or very quiet. And it would never again be anything new. Dekker Barents had asked about his arm and now he was thinking about it again, having watched Robert Leader leave the fire and then looked into the flame until his eyes no longer focused and his mind achieved that state of complete sanity in detachment from himself.

"He don't have much stomach," Dekker said, suddenly.

"Neither do I. Not for what you showed me today."

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"What did I show you today?"

"Nothing."

"You don't like me, do you, Harry?"

"Maybe I've known you too long," Harry said.

"Why didn't you tell Stone what happened today?"

"What would that accomplish? The less we talk about that, the better I'll like it."

First Subaltern Jackson, Pioneer Corps, United Nations Space Service, Harry thought, reciting his full rank and service to himself. What am I doing here? A glorified armed guard to an organized crew of vultures, bleeding every livable or breathable planet dry to enhance a culture devoted to gracious living. It's a purpose, I suppose.

And there was the girl who had lived in Tien-tsin. That was in Howell's office on Vigo Street, and she had left before Howell came back from the Foreign Office. Howell had told him about the first expedition—how long ago had that been, eight years?—and now a lark had become a profession. He wondered how long the girl had waited that night in the bar at the Dorchester, or whether she had showed up at all. He threw the end of the cigarette into the darkness where he knew the first shift of the double watch was already posted. How many times had he thought about that girl? On how many planets, in how many camp sites just like this, with how many fellow officers like Barents?

The arm was better now, but it had hurt enough in the beginning, after the first shock. Then the pain got so bad on the way back, that when the sled dipped once he almost passed out. Now it was better. It was dressed and he could use the arm. The blouse was blackened, with two tiny holes, but no hole in the arm—only a gash. And the pain was going away.

"Dekker, have you really got a bottle of cognac?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Dekker said.

"Get it."

"What for?"

"I want to drink to the aliens. The natives, really. We're the true aliens here, you know."

"To the aliens?"

"To my arm then. Get the bottle."

"Later."

"Get it now."

"Your arm is hurting bad again, Harry."

"No."

"What if I don't have a bottle?"

"You've got it."

"Maybe I've drunk it all up already."

"You don't drink alone, Dekker. And nobody in this crew likes you enough to fight with you after the bottle's empty."

"Except you, Harry."

Harry laughed. "That's right, Dekker. Except me."

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Dekker Barents laughed. "I'll be right back."

Dekker went to the cluster of huts. Harry watched him go. Me and a Martian, he thought. Drinking up a storm way the hell and gone across the universe. What an idiotic world. A bottle of cognac, cheap stuff probably. First subalterns' benefits aren't the world's best, of course. He didn't like cognac. Now here's just a place to become particular, Harry, old boy. Tell the man scotch, with a twist of lemon peel and just the slightest dash of bitters. Anything for the boys.

"All right, Harry," Dekker said. "But let's do it quietly."

"All right."

Dekker Barents squatted next to Harry and set down the familiarly labeled container carefully in front of him. He laughed.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked.

"Look. The cap is equipped to insert sippers. Imagine drinking this in free fall."

"Open it up."

Dekker picked up the container and struggled with the cap a minute. "I can't get it open, Harry."

"Then crack the top off," Harry said.

"Don't kid me."

"I'm not kidding you, Dek. Crack the top off. Then we'll have to drink the whole thing." Harry picked up the bottle and read the label.

"Don't, Harry. You couldn't finish the whole bottle."

"I can try."

"It's not such good stuff."

"It's export, isn't it? Look at the label. You bought it on Mars."

"Tax-free port. Here, give me the bottle."

Harry looked off into the darkness and caught the glint of metal reflecting the firelight. The guard, up along the rim of the hill, he thought. Tired of standing still. Then he turned his attention back to Dekker and watched him struggle the cognac open.

Subaltern Robert Leader lay on his bunk in the hut, his eyes closed, breathing quietly. He opened his eyes and saw the flicker of reflected firelight through the translucence of the dural hut side. He wiped his face and closed his eyes again, and he thought of the Martian who had driven the sled, and of Harry Jackson, and then he heard laughter. That's Harry, he thought. He lay still then, and did not think about anything, and listened for more laughter. He did not hear it again. He did not hear anything more until something touched his arm. His body stiffened.

"I say, Leader, are you asleep?"

"No," Leader said, then twisted his head and saw the face of Captain Stone, commander of the survey crew, and of the camp. "Sir," he added softly.

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"Can we talk for a moment?"

"Yes, sir. Of course." Robert sat up.

"Just what happened to you three today?" Stone asked.

"Why don't you ask Barents?" Robert said.

"Jackson told me you'd made contact, nothing more. You didn't start anything with them?"

"I didn't."

"I'm not asking that, dammit. Jackson comes to me, his arm a perfect mess, and tells me sorry old man, nothing more than routine contact. And by the way, shouldn't we be doubling the watch tonight? The flagship is beyond our zone of screening, you know, and our own scanners cannot be depended upon on alien worlds. Something about ionization jamming up signals. Well, not quite like that, he let the M. O. dress the arm. But that's all I know."

"Why not ask them?"

"I don't know," Stone said. "I've a feeling you'd be the only one to tell me."

"Why?"

"I told you I don't know, Leader."

Robert turned away. "We found them, all right. Hardly made contact, though. Barents drove them off and burnt a hut of theirs or something. Made of cloth. He fired at them too."

"What? Why didn't you stop him?" Stone's voice rose slightly. "The bloody fool. What's the matter with you?"

"We tried," Robert Leader said softly. He turned away again.

"They defended themselves, of course."

"No. They ran."

"Then how did Jackson get hurt?"

"Dekker."

"Dekker?"

"It was an accident," Robert said stiffly.

"Oh, yes," Stone said. "I'll lay on that. An accident."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Leader."

"Do you think there will be trouble?"

"I doubt it. The expedition reports describe the natives as a nomadic people. Agricultural mainly, but they have metals and very primitive firearms. Jackson is no fool and he seemed quite unconcerned about it. But it is a devil of a way to treat natives. You should have stopped them."

"I tried, sir."

"You're worried, Leader. What about?"

"Nothing."

"Come now, let's have it. This isn't a maneuver, you know. Did you notice anything? You were thoroughly briefed before all this."

"I don't know anything about this planet."

"Neither do any of us. Their clothes. They dressed in black, men as well as women?"

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"No," Leader said. "I think there were only men. They were wearing helmets. Metal helmets."

"Yes?"

"That's all. That's all I saw."

Captain Stone was quiet. He studied Leader's face, but he was not really thinking about Leader. "How many did you see?" he asked.

"Four."

"Only four? Don't worry, then, Leader." Stone's voice relaxed, then. He looked at Leader. That's just what I need, here, he thought. A raw, green subaltern, and a spineless one in the bargain. "That's all, Leader. Get some sleep. I've posted you for the last watch. It's tiring here, isn't it? It's the heat, and the planet cycle. About forty of our hours to the day here. Goes almost twenty hours of daylight. Very tiring. Good night, Leader."

"Good night, sir." Robert Leader rolled over on the bunk as acknowledgement of the end of the conversation. He heard Stone's boots on the dry ground as he walked off, then he didn't hear anything more.

"Drink, Harry, it cleans out the insides."

Harry Jackson looked at the bottle on the ground before him, then at Barents.

Dekker Barents smiled. "What's the matter, Harry, you lost your big thirst?"

"No." Harry raised the container and drank. Then he lowered it and read the label again slowly. Dekker took it from his hand.

"Let's drink to space, Harry. I'm an original spaceman, you know. I was born on Mars. That's why I'm black and half again as big as you are. You know that? My grand parents were real pioneers. They just call us pioneers. But they're the real goods. They were in the first colony on Mars. True pioneers."

Harry looked up at Barents. "Your grand parents were the first modern age suckers, Dek. They bought the lies right out of the sunday supplements and climbed aboard for a trip to their own private dust bowl."

"You're wrong, Harry. That's just nature. Until man turns his hand to it, all nature is chaos. You see this planet? A bloody desert, you know. We could make it a jungle if we wanted to. A nicely landscaped one too."

"Yes," Harry said. "And what happened to your man-made paradise in the dust storms twenty years ago? They practically evacuated Mars."

"Yes, I know. I know. I was on Earth four years. Children evacuated first. I don't know why. Children have very little to lose."

"Except their lives."

"That's the cheapest commodity in the universe, Harry. Take it from me. You know where they

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sent me? They sent me to the southern United States of America. Me, a Martian refugee. Placed in a special school and everything. They used to bring delegations of ladies from the charities out to see us. One once had a camera and asked me to pose for a picture with her. She seemed sort of disappointed we didn't have three heads or something. Ever had your picture taken as a Martian refugee, Harry? All done up in native costume and everything?"

"No."

"It makes you feel great." Then Dekker raised the bottle and drank again, not lowering the bottle until he began to cough, and cognac spilled from the bottle as his hand shook. "Great, you hear?"

"Quiet, Dek," Harry said.

"Quiet? Listen to me, First Subaltern Jackson, you don't whisper great exultation. You shout it." He rose to his feet, the bottle in his hand, and turned to face the barren hills of the planet Lodan, black now, and the stars that were dimmed in the light of the fire. "You know what shouting is?" he called to the hills. "You think you're dead? Maybe you were once. But we're here now. The professional life extractors. We will effect a glorious transformation. We will turn your disorder into an architectural masterpiece of colossal garbage heaps. You hear? You hear?"

Dekker Barents turned from the silence that was his only response and looked at Harry. He squatted by the fire again. "You're all right, Harry. The only man in a thousand light years worth drinking with. You proved it today. And I'm all right too." He stood again, raising the bottle to his lips. He did not see Captain Robin Stone kneel where Harry was sitting.

"What did you do out there today?" Stone asked Harry.

Dekker looked down. "We ran onto a couple of women, and one of them twisted Harry's arm," he said and laughed. He put down the bottle. "Stone. I say, Captain Stone. You are a most splendid executive officer. And it is your great privilege to be served by the team of Jackson and Barents, atrocity-makers at law. I hereby tender myself to be placed on the carpet for drinking on an alien world. Most wretched example to place before the natives, I must admit. Mustn't you?"

"Stop him, Jackson."

"You stop him," Harry said.

"You're the only one can handle him."

"Me?"

"Would you care to join two lonely extra-territorial officers in a drink, Captain Stone?" Dekker said.

Stone looked up a moment, then returned his attention to Harry. "The group you made contact with, Harry. What were they?"

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"How would I know? We didn't get to speak to them."

"Leader said they wore helmets."

"What?"

"Metal helmets."

"Go ask him again."

"Look, Harry, helmets might imply a military unit," Stone said.

"Might also be the latest Lodan fashion," Harry said, smiling.

"The expedition report spoke nothing of military units. They covered the whole planet. How would you explain no mention of helmets?"

"Like I said, they weren't in fashion yet."

"Listen, Harry," Dekker said. "I've got three brand new Martian suits. Let's all get dressed up and pose for the ladies. The latest mode in fattened up refugees. What do you say, Captain?"

"Jackson," Stone said. "Do something with him."

"Let him ride himself out. It won't take long."

"Get him quiet, then. Get him ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Good Lord, man. For anything that might happen. I'm sure you didn't effect the friendliest contact today."

"Don't report it to the flagship," Harry said. "You'll make a fool of yourself."

Stone was quiet a moment. "All right. But we must take precautions here, nonetheless. Do something."

"Nothing will happen, Captain. There were only four of them."

"Well, get him quiet."

"I'll even get him ready, if you want." Harry looked at Dekker.

Dekker Barents sat on the ground. "What's that?"

"Are you ready, Dek?" Harry asked.

"For what?"

"Nothing, just ready."

Dekker became quiet then, and set down the almost empty bottle. He looked at Harry. "Yes," he said. "I'm ready. Let's go to sleep."

For a time, since it started, Robert Leader had felt shame. But the fear had returned and it was still there, this time not be replaced by shame or sleep or hunger, but by the mental alteration of truth that only time and a different proximity could bring. Sit tight until this tour of duty is over, he thought. That's all. If he would be lucky, that was. Captain Stone said not to worry. But how did one go about doing that? He didn't want to worry or feel all this, but he wanted that axe and not all the rest that went with the axe. And throwing the thing away would not ever make it all right either. This was stupid to begin with, he thought. But it isn't stupid now. Not since it started.

It had started the night before, shortly before first light. Leader had wakened early to see the rise

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of the twin suns and he lay in his bunk. Then he heard the guard come off the last watch and speak with Captain Stone. The guard had seen a fire off in the hills. A small fire. There were twelve crews conducting this survey. The flagship had not dropped any crew as close as this to where they were. They made contact with the flagship and reported. On a world of advanced civilization, formal contacts were protocol. On planets such as Lodan, they were rarely bothered about, only to quell any disturbances. The flagship commander operated from the findings of the first expeditionary report and instructed Stone to make contact if he deemed it advisable. This did not warrant dropping out of orbit. Stone, being an ambitious officer, had decided to establish contact as a furtherance of operational procedure. It might make up for the lack of findings of his survey team. This planet was turning out to be as barren as it looked. Stone chose Barents to make the contact. Barents would require Jackson. "We've worked as a team before, sir, you know," he'd said. "And mightn't it be an interesting bit of experience for the new Subaltern? Leader?"

They left the camp an hour after midday, and Robert Leader had long now lost track of where they were. He sat in the right front seat of the air sled, its pressure-cabin top removed in deference to the breatheable atmosphere, a replica of Earth's. He looked at the gray hills and depressions that were the same as all the land he had seen for fifteen days, and watched the double shadow of the sled skip over the rough ground three feet beneath them. His hands were wet. He did not look at Dekker Barents who sat at his left, in the driver's seat.

"Are you sure you know where we are?" he asked.

"Sure, kid, don't worry," Barents said.

Robert continued to look at the hills, wiping his hands on his uniform, holding his weapon tightly.

They came to a rise between two low hills and the sled dropped to the ground.

"There," Dekker said. He pointed across a stretch of flat land, past a low hill, to a hill beyond that. Robert saw the long black structure then, low to the ground, its cantilevers moving in the slight breeze. While he looked, his weapon slipped from his hands to the floor of the sled. It clattered loudly and the other men looked down. He picked up the weapon and continued looking at the cloth building.

"There are four of them," Dekker Barents said. "Let's see what they're like."

He repowered the jets and the sled lifted and moved forward. They came to a near hill and lost

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sight of the black building, and the sled coasted to the top of the hill and stopped suddenly, hitting the ground hard, and Robert Leader saw them. While the sled was stopped, they had crouched low and covered their heads with their black cloaks. But now they were running. One had run to the structure and done something which caused it to collapse and when the sled stopped atop the hill, Robert could see it still billowing down slowly, and the aliens were running. He saw the glint of sunlight off the metal helmets they wore. Dekker Barents was standing on the seat. Robert looked up and saw him frowning.

"Why are they running?" Dekker said, almost absently.

"Wouldn't you?" Robert said.

"They've probably got no right here."

"Neither have we," Harry Jackson said, from the back seat.

"Let's make it, then," Dekker said. "Give me your blaster, Leader."

"What for?"

"What the devil do you think for? Give it to me."

"No."

"Give me that damned gun." Dekker wrenched the weapon from Robert's hands, and just then he was hit from behind. He swung the blaster and Robert dropped down. The stock passed over his head, and Harry Jackson caught it, and Dekker swung around.

"Let it go, Harry."

"You're not going to do any shooting, Dek," Harry said.

"You're wrong, Harry."

Harry Jackson tried to pull the blaster from Dekker's hand, and Dekker's other hand was down and up and his sidearm was there. He shouted and Harry hit him, and the flame pistol fired and Robert heard Harry cry out. Then he heard the roar of his blaster, and he looked up and saw Dekker Barents sitting on the back of the seat, the blaster at his shoulder, and a flash as the suns caught the ejected shell flying out over his head, and Robert began to cry.

Dekker fired the entire magazine, then dropped the blaster across Robert's lap and turned to Harry. He bent toward him.

"Get away from me," Harry said.

Dekker jumped down in the seat and the sled lifted and moved forward once more. Robert looked around and saw Harry Jackson slumped heavily in the back seat, holding his left arm near the shoulder. He saw Harry's eyes in that moment, then he looked away.

The air sled stopped near the collapsed dwelling, and Robert Leader could not see the aliens. Dekker climbed down from the sled.

"Reload the blaster, Leader," he said.

Then Robert Leader became aware of the blaster across his

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knees. He did nothing about reloading, but sat motionless, looking at the fallen black hut. Dekker was walking back and forth along the mass of black cloth, kicking it once or twice. He then returned to the sled.

"You see anything you like, kid?" Dekker asked Robert.

"No."

"Go ahead and take a look. They sometimes have very pretty things about. Typical nomadic tribesmen. Find them on a million planets. Strange how alike they all are. Go take a look."

Dekker was at the back of the sled now, and Robert turned to him. He saw Harry. Harry was watching Dekker. Robert stepped out of the sled.

"You're going to burn it, of course," Harry said.

Robert looked at Harry.

"Of course," Dekker said, and smiled. Then, to Robert, "You want a souvenir, you'd better make it fast."

Robert turned to the fallen hut.

"Stop him," Harry said heavily.

Robert stopped, his back to Harry. Then, after a moment, he walked to the hut slowly and kicked back a fold of the black cloth, and he saw the axe. It had a short heavy, chopping blade and was fashioned of a black material with no gloss. He bent and picked it up. It was enormously heavy for its size. The blade was thick, had a weight as if it were stone. It was as sharp as any cutting instrument he had ever seen. The handle was white, carved with many intricately woven characters. They meant nothing to Robert. It was an axe such as Robert had never seen, in or out of museums, or anyplace else. He turned quickly, and walked back to the sled. Dekker passed him, going back to the hut. Robert did not look at Harry. He climbed back into the sled and watched Dekker.

"What sort of souvenir did you find, Robert?" he heard Harry say. He did not look around.

"A hand axe," he said softly. "It isn't much."

"No, it isn't much."

Dekker walked the length of the hut, firing the flame pistol three or four times at the black cloth. He stopped and looked around slowly at the hills.

"You should have stopped him, Robert" Harry Jackson said.

Robert Leader said nothing, and watched Dekker fire at the cloth once more, and now the whole mass of cloth was in flames. The black smoke rose straight up, and Dekker came back to the sled. He put his hand on Harry's arm. Harry pulled the arm away.

"It creased the skin," Harry said. "A nice scorch."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Dekker said, and climbed into the driver's seat.

"Does it hurt very much, Harry?" Robert Leader asked, not looking around.

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"Yes. It hurts very much now."

The jets fired and the sled rose. Robert looked down at the axe which he had placed on the floor. He did not look up again until he knew they were far enough away not to see the burning hut, and then he looked up, but he did not look back. The fear gripped him solidly then, and it brought tears to his eyes. I hate them, he thought. It was a feeling of just a moment, nor was it clear to him who he meant. It passed almost instantly.

No one said anything during the trip back to the camp. Harry was sick once, and Dekker stopped the sled to help him. He refused the drink, Robert thinking it was because Harry wouldn't accept anything from Dekker, but Harry knowing better than to drink in such heat during a long trip. Dekker acknowledged this and mumbled something, then they started again. They did not get back to camp until just before dark.

That was how it had been earlier that day, and how it had started. Now it would not stop. Nobody had spoken of it. He had hoped that when they were back in camp, the silence would be broken and something would be said. But it had not happened. The fire and the two others had been an eternity for Robert to endure, and when the silence had finally been broken, the words had only made it worse.

He opened his eyes. It was dark and he could not see the light of the fire through the hut wall. He had been asleep. He did not know how long. The fire was out so it must be well along toward morning. He lay awake for a while, looking at the darkness. Once, he felt beneath his bunk and touched the axe. It made him feel good to touch it, but it immediately brought everything back and the good feeling disappeared. After a while, he stopped thinking about anything and went back to sleep.

He was wakened by someone entering the hut. Hollis, one of the geologists who had drawn guard duty that night, was turning in from his shift. He lay down in his bunk.

"Hollis?" Robert whispered.

"Yes. Bloody cold out there. In here too, matter of fact."

"Hollis—"

"Yes, Leader?"

"Nothing."

"I spoke with your brethren in arms just before, old man. Heard you had an interesting afternoon. Oh, well, better a soldier than a geologist. Nothing to do coming. Nothing to do while you're here. Nothing to do going. Active life, I must say. Good night, Leader."

"Did they tell you what happened?"

"When? Oh, this afternoon. Yes. Typical. Dekker is more than a little crazy, you know. I shouldn't worry about it. Never appear

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in the records, I shouldn't think."

"How can he talk to him?" Robert said.

"How can who talk to whom?"

"Harry, I mean. How can he even look at Dekker after what happened?"

"Oh, you mean the arm. It was an accident, or so they told me. They're old friends, those two, you know. Quite nice chaps, too. A bit on the wild side, but quite nice."

"I don't understand," Robert said. "If it was me, I'd hate him."

"Really?"

"Yes. I think I might even want to kill him, or something, I swear it."

"Then I imagine Dekker should be quite thankful it wasn't you," Hollis said broadly. Hollis smiled then, but Robert did not see the smile.

Robert was quiet for a moment. "Yes," he said softly. "I hate him anyway. I hate them both."

"I'd try getting a bit of sleep, Robert." Hollis had lost interest in Robert's conversation, and his hates.

"Dekker shot the aliens up, Hollis. Did they tell you that?"

"Something of the like was mentioned. They've had a bit to drink out there, you know. Not too coherent conversationalists right now. What about it?"

"You don't think they'll come after us?"

"The aliens? My word, no, Leader," Hollis said.

"They'll come."

"I shouldn't spend my time worrying over it, believe me."

"They'll come."

Hollis turned away. "Very well, old man. If they come, they come. Have it your way, then. But don't worry aloud, please. I'm quite a light sleeper."

"They'll come. I know they'll come," Robert said.

Hollis turned back then. "By the way, Leader, I hear you got yourself something of a smashing hatchet this afternoon. I should like to see it tomorrow, if you don't mind. Weapons are something of a side interest, you know."

"It isn't a weapon," Robert said.

Hollis chuckled. "Perhaps. But one can always speak of it as having been a weapon. That is, to someone who'd never been to Lodan, of course."

"Of course," Robert said softly.

Hollis laughed aloud.

"Trophies," Hollis said lightly. "Why are the men who fear life most the ones who must have trophies?" He was quiet then, and he heard Robert's breathing. "Robert," he said, "life is a very fine thing. The only thing we don't really get enough of is time, you know. There's never enough time to do all the living we want. Isn't it an awful waste to take even a small part of that time to be afraid of dying? We're here, man. What the hell. That's the way it is. You understand?"

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"Yes," Robert said.

"Well, then, good night."

"But what if they do come?"

"Oh, blast it all. Go to sleep."

Robert lay back. It would be two hours until his turn at the watch. He closed his eyes, but did not sleep.

Another hour passed before he heard the first shot.

It all happened before he knew what it was about. At first he heard the one shot, alone like a sharp crack, and his eyes opened and he saw nothing. Then he heard Hollis.

"That, I should imagine, will be your *trouble*," Hollis said, and he was gone. Robert did not get up. Then the sounds made him get up off his cot and crouch on the ground, his hands covering his eyes tightly.

Outside, the men heard the shot, and they were out of the other hut. They heard the sound of two men running down the hill to the camp. They heard Dekker Barents' voice, and they knew it was he and Harry.

"I think they're gone," Dekker shouted.

"No," Harry said, and then there were many sounds, cracking-like shots and the roars of blasters and the sounds of flame pistols. The sounds came close upon each other in small flames of bluish light that stayed in flashes before their eyes. It was over in less than a minute. All that remained was a smell of burning, and the quiet.

"I've got one of them," Dekker shouted. "Get some light."

Someone ran to the hut and switched on a revolving beam. The beam was brought to rest on one spot and Dekker pushed the Lodan native ahead of him into the light. Dekker held a blaster against his back.

The Lodan was dressed in a long black cape, touching the ground. His height was less than that of an Earthman, and his build broader. Except for that, as on all the worlds men had visited, he was humanoid. He wore a very highly polished headgear with a metal chin strap that clasped to the neckline of the black cape. Beneath the cape he wore loose fitting garments, also black. A blouse and long trousers with cloth boots actually an extension of the trousers. His clothes were ragged, showed signs of age and great wear.

"What do you say, Barents?" Captain Stone said. "He looks decidedly military to me."

"That's no soldier," Dekker said.

"How would you know?"

"No spit and polish, Captain. I've seen military men on a thousand planets. No, sir, this one hasn't soldiered a day in his entire life."

"And the helmet?"

"I've seen stranger things. Maybe it reflects the heat away. I

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wouldn't know. It shouldn't be too difficult to figure, though. I'll tell you one thing, it doesn't look to be of native manufacture. I'd say it came from elsewhere."

"Where?"

Dekker looked at the Captain. "The speculations, my dear Captain, are limitless. I should think it more profitable right now if we tried to communicate with this wretch."

"Yes," Stone said. "But that will require the flagship. They've the equipment. I'll have to report all this, of course. He looks friendly enough. Terrified out of his soul, I guess. Their courage, I should say, is a little inhuman."

"Perhaps pre-human," Dekker said.

"Well, at any rate, I'm glad this is over. Your Subaltern, Leader, has a pretty good nose, hasn't he? He called it, Barents, didn't he?"

"Yes, he called it."

Harry motioned to the Lodan to sit down. He understood and squatted on the ground, not using his hands, not arranging his clothing.

Harry rested his blaster in his bad arm and took a cigarette from a packet in his blouse. He lit it and inhaled deeply.

"Look at this," Barents said. He held a weapon in his hand. "It looks like an ancient musket. What a thing to fight with."

Barents also lit a cigarette. He looked down at the Lodan who was watching him. "I think they know the use of tobacco," he said. "Or something like it." He shook a cigarette loose in the packet and offered it to the Lodan. The Lodan looked at the packet, then up at Barents' face, but did not move.

"Go ahead," Barents said, motioning with the packet. The Lodan turned away.

Barents was quiet then, looking at the Lodan. Harry looked from the Lodan to Barents. He took a cigarette from Barents' packet and offered it silently to the seated figure. The Lodan looked from Harry to Barents, then back at Harry again. His face relaxed for a moment, and Dekker Barents laughed.

"How do you like that," Dekker said. "He's making you out the hero. I'll be damned, Harry. He's made you the bloody hero." He laughed aloud again.

The Lodan's hand came up for the cigarette, and Harry smiled, and the Lodan felt a sudden heat explode in his back and he was slammed forward on his face. The sound of the blaster at close range was followed by another shot, and the Lodan's body jerked on the ground. Then it lay still, face down.

The Lodan had known the use of tobacco, a form of which the men of his people used for smoking. They would roll an entire leaf and smoke it that way. He had been too concerned by the blasters

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and what he had seen them do that day to want to smoke. But the man with the bandaged arm had offered it in true meaning. Also, he remembered the big, dark man who had burned the hut. He reached for the cigarette, and Harry smiled, and Dekker had laughed aloud again, and Robert Leader had crouched on his knees in the hut and heard all that went before, and looked down at the axe, and was suddenly overcome by the feeling which now became full-fledged hatred. Hatred of Dekker Barents, and of Harry and of everything they were, and he wasn't. And hatred of Lodan, of the being here which prevented the axe from having the meaning he wanted it to have, of making himself what he knew he could make himself believe he was once he got back on Earth.

And then he came out of the hut and brought his blaster out with him and shot the Lodan sitting in the beam of light with two quick direct blasts. He did not even remember releasing the shell of the first round for the second. The Lodan had been hit half way down the right side of his back. The second shot got him in the right buttock.

He lay still now, his face in the ground, and Robert Leader walked slowly toward the light. Captain Stone rushed past Leader, and when he saw what was in the light, looked back at Robert. Stone turned to Dekker. Then, he kneeled by the body for a moment, and he stood and looked at Dekker silently.

Captain Stone walked away from the light, not looking at Robert Leader, or any of the men who were there now. Robert Leader came into the light and looked down at the body.

"That's a beautiful thing you've done, Leader," Dekker Barents said. "Really very pretty."

Robert was going to speak, but instead sat on the ground, dropped the blaster, and covered his face with his hands.

"Don't worry, Leader. Stone is telling the flagship he was killed in the fighting, so it's actually as if you'd done it then. Good for your record."

Robert Leader began to cry.

"Don't worry about it," Dekker Barents said.

"Shut up, won't you?" Robert said.

"You're really quite a marksman," Dekker said. "Amazing. You had no concern about hitting any of us, and we so close to the savage too. Isn't it a bit of marksmanship, Harry?"

"That's enough, Dekker," Harry Jackson said.

"What have you got against me, Harry?"

"Nothing," Harry said. "I've got nothing against you."

Then Dekker did not say anything.

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Helva and Jennan were a wonderful team; their lives would be full even if they never did get out to the Horsehead Nebulae . . .

THE SHIP WHO SANG

by Anne McCaffrey

SHE WAS BORN A THING AND AS such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all newborn babies. There was always the possibility that though the limbs were twisted, the mind was not, that though the ears would hear only dimly, the eyes see vaguely, the mind behind them was receptive and alert.

The electro-encephalogram was entirely favorable, unexpectedly so, and the news was brought to the waiting, grieving parents. There was the final, harsh decision: to give their child euthanasia or permit it to become an encapsulated "brain," a guiding mechanism in any one of a number of curious professions. As such, their offspring would suffer no pain, live a comfortable existence in a metal shell for several centuries, performing unusual service to Central Worlds.

She lived and was given a name, Helva. For her first three vegetable months she waved her crabbed claws, kicked weakly with her clubbed feet and enjoyed the usual routine of the infant. She was not alone for there were three other such children in the big city's special nursery. Soon they all were removed to Central Laboratory School where their delicate transformation began.

One of the babies died in the initial transferral but of Helva's 'class,' seventeen thrived in the metal shells. Instead of kicking feet, Helva's neural responses started her wheels; instead of grabbing with hands, she manipulated mechanical extensions. As she matured, more and more neural synapses would be adjusted to operate other mechanisms that went into the maintenance and running of a space ship. For Helva was destined to be the 'brain' half of a scout ship, partnered with a man or a woman, whichever she chose, as the mobile half. She would be among the elite of her

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kind. Her initial intelliegnce tests registered above normal and her adaptation index was unusually high. As long as her development within her shell lived up to expectations, and there were no side-effects from the pituitary tinkering, Helva would live a rewarding, rich and unusual life, a far cry from what she would have faced as an ordinary, 'normal' being.

However, no diagram of her brain patterns, no early I.Q. tests recorded certain essential facts about Helva that Central must eventually learn. They would have to bide their official time and see, trusting that the massive doses of shell-psychology would suffice her, too, as the necessary bulwark against her unusual confinement and the pressures of her profession. A ship run by a human brain could not run rogue or insane with the power and resources Central had to build into their scout ships. Brain ships were, of course, long past the experimental stages. Most babes survived the perfected techniques of pituitary manipulation that kept their bodies small, eliminating the necessity of transfers from smaller to larger shells. And very, very few were lost when the final connection was made to the control panels of ship or industrial combine. Shell people resembled mature dwarfs in size whatever their natal deformities were, but the well-oriented brain would not have changed places with the most perfect body in the Universe.

So, for happy years, Helva scooted around in her shell with her classmates, playing such games as Stall, Power-Seek, studying her lessons in trajectory, propulsion techniques, computation, logistics, mental hygiene, basic alien psychology, philology, space history, law, traffic, codes: all the et ceteras that eventually became compounded into a reasoning, logical, informed citizen. Not so obvious to her, but of more importance to her teachers, Helva ingested the precepts of her conditioning as easily as she absorbed her nutrient fluid. She would one day be grateful to the patient drone of the sub-conscious-level instruction.

Helva's civilization was not without busy, do-good associations, exploring possible inhumanities to terrestrial as well as extra-terrestrial citizens. One such group got all incensed over shelled 'children' when Helva was just turning fourteen. When they were forced to, Central Worlds shrugged its shoulders, arranged a tour of the Laboratory Schools and set the tour off to a big start by showing the members case histories, complete with photographs. Very few committees ever looked past the first few photos. Most of their original objections about 'shells' were overriden by the relief that these hideous (to them) bodies *were* mercifully concealed.

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Helva's class was doing Fine Arts, a selective subject in her crowded program. She had activated one of her microscopic tools which she would later use for minute repairs to various parts of her control panel. Her subject was large—a copy of the Last Supper—and her canvas, small—the head of a tiny screw. She had tuned her sight to the proper degree. As she worked she absentmindedly crooned, producing a curious sound. Shell people used their own vocal chords and diaphragms but sound issued through microphones rather than mouths. Helva's hum then had a curious vibrancy, a warm, dulcet quality even in its aimless chromatic wanderings.

"Why, what a lovely voice you have," said one of the female visitors.

Helva 'looked' up and caught a fascinating panorama of regular, dirty craters on a flaky pink surface. Her hum became a gurgle of surprise. She instinctively regulated her 'sight' until the skin lost its cratered look and the pores assumed normal proportions.

"Yes, we have quite a few years of voice training, madam," remarked Helva calmly. "Vocal peculiarities often become excessively irritating during prolonged intra-stellar distances and must be eliminated. I enjoyed my lessons."

Although this was the first time that Helva had seen unshelled people, she took this experience calmly. Any other reaction would have been reported instantly.

"I meant that you have a nice singing voice . . . dear," the lady amended.

"Thank you. Would you like to see my work?" Helva asked, politely. She instinctively sheered away from personal discussions but she filed the comment away for further meditation.

"Work?" asked the lady.

"I am currently reproducing the Last Supper on the head of a screw."

"O, I say," the lady twittered.

Helva turned her vision back to magnification and surveyed her copy critically.

"Of course, some of my color values do not match the old Master's and the perspective is faulty but I believe it to be a fair copy."

The lady's eyes, unmagnified, bugged out.

"Oh, I forget," and Helva's voice was really contrite. If she could have blushed, she would have. "You people don't have adjustable vision."

The monitor of this discourse grinned with pride and amusement as Helva's tone indicated pity for the unfortunate.

"Here, this will help," suggested Helva, substituting a magnifying device in one extension and holding it over the picture.

In a kind of shock, the ladies and gentlemen of the committee

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bent to observe the incredibly copied and brilliantly executed Last Supper on the head of a screw.

"Well," remarked one gentleman who had been forced to accompany his wife, "the good Lord can eat where angels fear to tread."

"Are you referring, sir," asked Helva politely, "to the Dark Age discussions of the number of angels who could stand on the head of a pin?"

"I had that in mind."

"If you substitute 'atom' for 'angel,' the problem is not insoluble, given the metallic content of the pin in question."

"Which you are programmed to compute?"

"Of course."

"Did they remember to program a sense of humor, as well, young lady?"

"We are directed to develop a sense of proportion, sir, which contributes the same effect."

The good man chortled appreciatively and decided the trip was worth his time.

If the investigation committee spent months digesting the thoughtful food served them at the Laboratory School, they left Helva with a morsel as well.

'Singing' as applicable to herself required research. She had, of course, been exposed to and enjoyed a music appreciation course which had included the better known classical works such as "Tristan und Isolde," "Candide," "Oklahoma," "Noze de Figaro," the atomic age singers, Eileen Farrell, Elvis Presley and Geraldine Todd, as well as the curious rhythmic progressions of the Venusians, Capellan visual chromatics and the sonic concerti of the Altairians. But 'singing' for any shell person posed considerable technical difficulties to be overcome. Shell people were schooled to examine every aspect of a problem or situation before making a prognosis. Balanced properly between optimism and practicality, the nondefeatist attitude of the shell people led them to extricate themselves, their ships and personnel, from bizarre situations. Therefore to Helva, the problem that she couldn't open her mouth to sing, among other restrictions, did not bother her. She would work out a method, by-passing her limitations, whereby she could sing.

She approached the problem by investigating the methods of sound reproduction through the centuries, human and instrumental. Her own sound production equipment was essentially more instrumental than vocal. Breath control and the proper enunciation of vowel sounds within the oral cavity appeared to require the most development and practise. Shell people did not, strictly speaking, breathe. For their purposes, oxygen and other gases were not drawn from the surrounding atmosphere through the medium of lungs but

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sustained artificially by solution in their shells. After experimentation, Helva discovered that she could manipulate her diaphragmic unit to sustain tone. By relaxing the throat muscles and expanding the oral cavity well into the frontal sinuses, she could direct the vowel sounds into the most felicitious position for proper reproduction through her throat microphone. She compared the results with tape recordings of modern singers and was not unpleased although her own tapes had a peculiar quality about them, not at all unharmonious, merely unique. Acquiring a repertoire from the Laboratory library was no problem to one trained to perfect recall. She found herself able to sing any role and any song which struck her fancy. It would not have occurred to her that it was curious for a female to sing bass, baritone, tenor, alto, mezzo, soprano and coloratura as she pleased. It was, to Helva, only a matter of the correct reproduction and diaphragmic control required by the music attempted.

If the authorities remarked on her curious avocation, they did so among themselves. Shell people were encouraged to develop a hobby so long as they maintained proficiency in their technical work.

On the anniversary of her sixteenth year in her shell, Helva was unconditionally graduated and installed in her ship, the XH-834. Her permanent titanium shell was recessed behind an even more indestructible barrier in the centeral shaft of the scout ship. The neural, audio, visual and sensory connections were made and sealed. Her extendibles were diverted, connected or augmented and the final, delicate-beyond-description brain taps were completed while Helva remained anaesthetically unaware of the proceedings. When she awoke, she *was* the ship. Her brain and intelligence controlled every function from navigation to such loading as a scout ship of her class needed. She could take care of herself and her ambulatory half, in any situation already recorded in the annals of Central Worlds and any situation its most fertile minds could imagine.

Her first actual flight, for she and her kind had made mock flights on dummy panels since she was eight, showed her complete mastery of the techniques of her profession. She was ready for her great adventures and the arrival of her mobile partner.

There were nine qualified scouts sitting around collecting base pay the day Helva was commissioned. There were several missions which demanded instant attention but Helva had been of interest to several department heads in Central for some time and each man was determined to have her assigned to *his* section. Consequently no one had remem-

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bered to introduce Helva to the prospective partners. The ship always chose its own partner. Had there been another 'brain' ship at the Base at the moment, Helva would have been guided to make the first move. As it was, while Central wrangled among itself, Robert Tanner sneaked out of the pilots' barracks, out to the field and over to Helva's slim metal hull.

"Hello, anyone at home?" Tanner wisecracked.

"Of course," replied Helva logically, activating her outside scanners. "Are you my partner?" she asked hopefully, as she recognized the Scout Service uniform.

"All you have to do is ask," he retorted hopefully.

"No one has come. I thought perhaps there were no partners available and I've had no directives from Central."

Even to herself Helva sounded a little self-pitying but the truth was she was lonely, sitting on the darkened field. Always she had had the company of other shells and more recently, technicians by the score. The sudden solitude had lost its momentary charm and become oppressive.

"No directives from Central is scarcely a cause for regret, but there happen to be eight other guys biting their fingernails to the quick just waiting for an invitation to board you, you beautiful thing."

Tanner was inside the central cabin as he said this, running appreciative fingers over her panel, the scout's gravity-couch, poking his head into the cabins, the galley, the head, the pressured-storage compartments.

"Now, if you want to give Central a shove and do *us* a favor all in one, call up the Barracks and let's have a ship-warming partner-picking party. Hmmmm?"

Helva chuckled to herself. He was so completely different from the occasional visitors or the various Laboratory technicians she had encountered. He was so gay, so assured, and she was delighted by his suggestion of a partner-picking party. Certainly it was not against anything in her understanding of regulations.

"Cencom, this is XH-834. Connect me with Pilot Barracks."

"Visual?"

"Please."

A picture of lounging men in various attitudes of boredom came on her screen.

"This is XH-834. Would the unassigned scouts do me the favor of coming aboard?"

Eight figures galvanized into action, grabbing pieces of wearing apparel, disengaging tape mechanisms, disentangling themselves from bedsheets and towels.

Helva dissolved the connection while Tanner chuckled gleefully and settled down to await their arrival.

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Helva was engulfed in an unshell-like flurry of anticipation. No actress on her opening night could have been more apprehensive, fearful or breathless. Unlike the actress, she could throw no hysterics, china objets d'art or greasepaint to relieve her tension. She could, of course, check her stores for edibles and drinks, which she did, serving Tanner from the virgin selection of her commissary.

Scouts were colloquially known as "brawns" as opposed to their ship "brains." They had to pass as rigorous a training program as the brains and only the top one percent of each contributory world's highest scholars were admitted to Central Worlds Scout Training Program. Consequently the eight young men who came pounding up the gantry into Helva's hospitable lock were unusually fine-looking, intelligent, well-coordinated and adjusted young men, looking forward to a slightly drunken evening, Helva permitting, and all quite willing to do each other dirt to get possession of her.

Such a human invasion left Helva mentally breathless, a luxury she thoroughly enjoyed for the brief time she felt she should permit it.

She sorted out the young men. Tanner's opportunism amused but did not specifically attract her; the blond Nordsen seemed too simple; dark-haired Al-atpay had a kind of obstinacy with which she felt no compassion: Mir-Ahnin's bitterness hinted an inner darkness she did not wish to lighten although he made the biggest outward play for her attention. Hers was a curious courtship—this would be only the first of several marriages for her, for brawns retired after 75 years of service, or earlier if they were unlucky. Brains, their bodies safe from any deterioration, served 200 years, and were then permitted to decide for themselves if they wished to continue. Helva had actually spoken to one shell person three hundred and twenty-two years old. She had been so awed by the contact she hadn't presumed to ask the personal questions she had wanted to.

Her choice did not stand out from the others until Tanner started to sing a scout ditty, recounting the misadventures of the bold, dense, painfully inept Billy Brawn. An attempt at harmony resulted in cacophony and Tanner wagged his arms wildly for silence.

"What we need is a roaring good lead tenor. Jennan, besides palming aces, what do you sing?"

"Sharp," Jennan replied with easy good humor.

"If a tenor is absolutely necessary, I'll attempt it," Helva volunteered.

"My good *woman*," Tanner protested.

"Sound your 'A'," laughed Jennan.

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Into the stunned silence that followed the rich, clear, high 'A,' Jennan remarked quietly, "Such an A Caruso would have given the rest of his notes to sing."

It did not take them long to discover her full range.

"All Tanner asked for was one roaring good lead tenor," Jennan complained jokingly, "and our sweet mistress supplies us an entire repertory company. The boy who gets this ship will go far, far, far."

"To the Horsehead Nebulae?" asked Nordsen, quoting an old Central saw.

"To the Horsehead Nebulae and back, we shall make beautiful music," countered Helva chuckling.

"Together," Jennan amended. "Only you'd better make the music and with my voice, I'd better listen."

"I rather imagined it would be I who listened," suggested Helva.

Jennan executed a stately bow with an intricate flourish of his crush-brimmed hat. He directed his bow towards the central control pillar where Helva *was*. Her own personal preference crystallized at that precise moment and for that particular reason: Jennan, alone of the men, had addressed his remarks directly at her physical presence, regardless of the fact that he knew she could pick up his image wherever he was in the ship and regardless of the fact that her body was behind massive metal walls. Throughout their partnership, Jennan never failed to turn his head in her direction no matter where he was in relation to her. In response to this personalization, Helva at that moment and from then on always spoke to Jennan only through her central mike, even though that was not always the most efficient method.

Helva didn't know that she fell in love with Jennan that evening. As she had never been exposed to love or affection, only the drier cousins, respect and admiration, she could scarcely have recognized her reaction to the warmth of his personality and consideration. As a shell-person, she considered herself remote from emotions largely connected with physical desires.

"Well, Helva, it's been swell meeting you," said Tanner suddenly as she and Jennan were arguing about the Baroque quality of "Come All Ye Sons of Art." "See you in space some time, you lucky dog, Jennan. Thanks for the party, Helva."

"You don't have to go so soon?" pleaded Helva, realizing belatedly that she and Jennan had been excluding the others from this discussion.

"Best man won," Tanner said, wryly. "Guess I'd better go get a tape on love ditties. May need 'em for the next ship, if there're any more at home like you."

Helva and Jennan watched

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them leave, both a little confused.

"Perhaps Tanner's jumping to conclusions?" Jennan asked.

Helva regarded him as he slouched against the console, facing her shell directly. His arms were crossed on his chest and the glass he held had been empty for some time. He was handsome, they all were; but his watchful eyes were unwary, his mouth assumed a smile easily, his voice (to which Helva was particularly drawn) was resonant, deep and without unpleasant overtones or accent.

"Sleep on it, at any rate, Helva. Call me in the morning if it's your op."

She called him at breakfast, after she had checked her choice through Central. Jennan moved his things aboard, received their joint commission, had his personality and experience file locked into her reviewer, gave her the coordinates of their first mission and the XH-834 officially became the JH-834.

Their first mission was a dull but necessary crash priority (Medical got Helva), rushing a vaccine to a distant system plagued with a virulent spore disease. They had only to get to Spica as fast as possible.

After the initial, thrilling forward surge at her maximum speed, Helva realized her muscles were to be given less of a workout than her brawn on this tedious mission. But they did have plenty of time for exploring each other's personalities. Jennan, of course, knew what Helva was capable of as a ship and partner, just as she knew what she could expect from him. But these were only facts and Helva looked forward eagerly to learning that human side of her partner which could not be reduced to a series of symbols. Nor could the give and take of two personalities be learned from a book. It has to be experienced.

"My father was a scout, too, or is that programmed?" began Jennan their third day out.

"Naturally."

"Unfair, you know. You've got all my family history and I don't know one blamed thing about yours."

"I've never known either," Helva confided. "Until I read yours, it hadn't occurred to me I must have one, too, someplace in Central's files."

Jennan snorted. "Shell psychology!"

Helva laughed. "Yes, and I'm even programmed against curiosity about it. You'd better be, too."

Jennan ordered a drink, slouched into the gravity couch opposite her, put his feet on the bumpers, turning himself idly from side to side on the gimbals.

"Helva—a made up name . . ."

"With a Scandanavian sound."

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"You aren't blonde," Jennan said positively.

"Well, then, there're dark Swedes."

"And blond Turks and this one's harem is limited to one."

"Your woman in purdah, yes, but you can comb the pleasure houses—" Helva found herself aghast at the edge to her carefully trained voice.

"You know," Jennan interrupted her, deep in some thought of his own, "my father gave me the impression he was a lot more married to his ship, the Silvia, than to my mother. I know I used to think Silvia was my grandmother. She was a low number so she must have been a great-great-grandmother at least. I used to talk to her for hours."

"Her registry?" asked Helva, unwitting of the jealousy for everyone and anyone who had shared his hours.

"422. I think she's TS now. I ran into Tom Burgess once."

Jennan's father had died of a planetary disease, the vaccine for which his ship had used up in curing the local citizens.

"Tom said he'd got mighty tough and salty. You loose your sweetness and I'll come back and haunt you, girl," Jennan threatened.

Helva laughed. He startled her by stamping up to the control panel, touching it with light, tender fingers.

"I *wonder* what you look like," he said softly, wistfully.

Helva had been briefed about this natural curiosity of scouts. She didn't know anything about herself and neither of them ever would or could.

"Pick any form, shape and shade and I'll be yours obliging," she countered as training suggested.

"Iron Maiden, I fancy blondes with long tresses," and Jennan pantomined Lady Godiva-like tresses. "Since you're immolated in titanium, I'll call you Brunehilda, my dear," and he made his bow.

With a chortle, Helva launched into the appropriate aria just as Spica made contact.

"What'n'ell's that yelling about? Who are you? And unless you're Central Worlds Medical go away. We've got a plague with no visiting privileges."

"My ship is singing, we're the JH-834 of Worlds and we've got your vaccine. What are our landing coordinates?"

"Your *ship* is singing?"

"The greatest S.A.T.B. in organized space. Any request?"

The JH-834 delivered the vaccine but no more arias and received immediate orders to proceed to Leviticus IV. By the time they got there, Jennan found a reputation awaiting him and was forced to defend the 834's virgin honor.

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"I'll stop singing," murmured Helva contritely as she ordered up poultices for his third black eye in a week.

"You will not," Jennan said through gritted teeth. "If I have to black eyes from here to the Horsehead to keep the snicker out of the title, we'll be the ship who sings."

After the 'ship who sings' tangled with a minor but vicious narcotic ring in the Lesser Magallenics, the title became definitely respectful. Central was aware of each episode and punched out a "special interest" key on JH-834's file. A first-rate team was shaking down well.

Jennan and Helva considered themselves a first-rate team, too, after their tidy arrest.

"Of all the vices in the universe, I *hate* drug addiction," Jennan remarked as they headed back to Central Base. "People can go to hell quick enough without that kind of help."

"Is that why you volunteered for Scout Service? To redirect traffic?"

"I'll bet my official answer's on your review."

"In far too flowery wording. 'Carrying on the traditions of my family which has been proud of four generations in Service' if I may quote you your own words."

Jennan groaned. "I was *very* young when I wrote that and I certainly hadn't been through Final Training and once I was in Final Training, my pride wouldn't let me fail. . . .

"As I mentioned, I used to visit Dad on board the Silvia and I've a very good idea she might have had her eye on me as a replacement for my father because I had had massive doses of scout-oriented propaganda. It took. From the time I was seven, I was going to be a scout or else." He shrugged as if deprecating a youthful determination that had taken a great deal of mature application to bring to fruition.

"Ah, so? Scout Sahir Silan on the JS-422 penetrating into the Horsehead Nebulae?"

Jennan chose to ignore her sarcasm.

"With *you*, I may even get that far but even with Silvia's nudging I never day-dreamed myself *that* kind of glory in my wildest flights of fancy. I'll leave the whoppers to your agile brain henceforth. I have in mind a smaller contribution to Space History."

"So modest?"

"No. Practical. We also serve, et cetera." He placed a dramatic hand on his heart.

"Glory hound!" scoffed Helva.

"Look who's talking, my Nebulae-bound friend. At least I'm not greedy. There'll only be one hero like my dad at Parsaea, but I *would* like to be remembered for some kudo. Everyone does. Why else do or die?"

"Your father died on his way

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back from Parsaea, if I may point out a few cogent facts. So he could never have known he was a hero for damning the flood with his ship. Which kept Parsaean colony from being abandoned. Which gave them a chance to discover the anti-paralytic qualities of Parsaea. Which *he* never knew."

"*I* know," said Jennan softly.

Helva was immediately sorry for the tone of her rebuttal. She knew very well how deep Jennan's attachment to his father had been. On his review a note was made that he had rationalized his father's loss with the unexpected and welcome outcome of the Affair at Parsaea.

"Facts are not human, Helva, My father was and so am I. And *basically*, so are you. Check over your dial, 834. Amid all the wires attached to you is a heart, an underdeveloped human heart. Obviously!"

"I apologize, Jennan," she said contritely.

Jennan hesitated a moment, threw out his hands in acceptance and then tapped her shell affectionately.

"If they ever take us off the milkruns, we'll make a stab at the Nebulae, huh?"

As so frequently happened in the Scout Service, within the next hour they had orders to change course, not to the Nebulae, but to a recently colonized system with two habitable planets, one tropical, one glacial. The sun, named Ravel, had become unstable; the spectrum was that of a rapidly expanding shell, with absorption lines rapidly displacing toward violet. The augmented heat of the primary had already forced evacuation of the nearer world, Daphnis. The pattern of spectral emissions gave indication that the sun would sear Chloe as well. All ships in the immediate spatial vicinity were to report to Disaster Headquarters on Chloe to effect removal of the remaining colonists.

The JH-834 obediently presented itself and was sent to outlying areas on Chloe to pick up scattered settlers who did not appear to appreciate the urgency of the situation. Chloe, indeed, was enjoying the first temperatures above freezing since it had been flung out of its parent. Since many of the colonists were religious fanatics who had settled on rigorous Chloe to fit themselves for a life of pious reflection, Chloe's abrupt thaw was attributed to sources other than a rampaging sun.

Jennan had to spend so much time countering specious arguments that he and Helva were behind schedule on their way to the fourth and last settlement.

Helva jumped over the high range of jagged peaks that surrounded and sheltered the valley

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from the former raging snows as well as the present heat. The violent sun with its flaring corona was just beginning to brighten the deep valley as Helva dropped down to a landing.

"They'd better grab their toothbrushes and hop aboard," Helva commented. "HQ says speed it up."

"All women," remarked Jennan in surprise as he walked down to meet them. "Unless the men on Chloe wear furred skirts."

"Charm 'em but pare the routine to the bare essentials. And turn on your two-way private."

Jennan advanced smiling, but his explanation of his mission was met with absolute incredulity and considerable doubt as to his authenticity. He groaned inwardly as the matriarch paraphrased previous explanations of the warming sun.

"Revered mother, there's been an overload on that prayer circuit and the sun is blowing itself up in one obliging burst. I'm here to take you to the spaceport at Rosary—"

"That Sodom?" the worthy woman glowered and shuddered disdainfully at his suggestion. "We thank you for your warning but we have no wish to leave our cloister for the rude world. We must go about our morning meditation which has been interrupted—"

"It'll be permanently interrupted when that sun starts broiling. You must come now," Jennan said firmly.

"Madame," said Helva, realizing that perhaps a female voice might carry more weight in this instance than Jennan's very masculine charm.

"Who spoke?" cried the nun, startled by the bodiless voice.

"I, Helva, the ship. Under my protection you and your sisters-in-faith may enter safely and be unprofaned by association with a male. I will guard you and take you safely to a place prepared for you."

The matriarch peered cautiously into the ship's open port.

"Since only Central Worlds is permitted the use of such ships, I acknowledge that you are not trifling with us, young man. However, we are in no danger here."

"The temperature at Rosary is now 99°," said Helva. "As soon as the sun's rays penetrate directly into this valley, it will also be 99°, and it is due to climb to approximately 180° today. I notice your buildings are made of wood with moss chinking. Dry moss. It should fire around noontime."

The sunlight was beginning to slant into the valley through the peaks and the fierce rays warmed the restless group behind the matriarch. Several opened the throats of their furry parkas.

"Jennan," said Helva privately to him, "our time is very short."

"I can't leave them, Helva.

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Some of those girls are barely out of their teens."

"Pretty, too. No wonder the matriarch doesn't want to get in."

"Helva."

"It will be the Lord's will," said the matriarch stoutly and turned her back squarely on rescue.

"To burn to death?" shouted Jennan as she threaded her way through her murmuring disciples.

"They want to be martyrs? Their opt, Jennan," said Helva dispassionately. "*We* must leave and that is no longer a matter of option."

"How can I leave, Helva?"

"Parsaea?" Helva flung tauntingly at him as he stepped forward to grab one of the women. "You can't drag them *all* aboard and we don't have time to fight it out. Get on board, Jennan, or I'll have you on report."

"They'll die," muttered Jennan dejectedly as he reluctantly turned to climb on board.

"You can risk only so much," Helva said sympathetically. "As it is we'll just have time to make a rendezvous. Lab reports a critical speed-up in spectral evolution."

Jennan was already in the airlock when one of the younger women, screaming, rushed to squeeze in the closing port. Her action sc. off the others and the others stampeded through the narrow opening. Even crammed back to breast, there was not enough room inside for all the women. Jennan broke out spacesuits to the three who would have to remain with him in the airlock. He wasted valuable time explaining to the matriarch that she must put on the suit because the airlock had no independent oxygen or cooling units.

"We'll be caught," said Helva grimly to Jennan on their private connection. "We've lost 18 minutes in this last-minute rush. I am now overloaded for maximum speed and I must attain maximum speed to outrun the heat-wave."

"Can you lift? We're suited."

"Lift? Yes," she said, doing so. "R. .? I stagger."

Jennan, bracing himself and the women, could feel her sluggishness as she blasted upward. Heartlessly, Helva applied thrust as long as she could, despite the fact that the gravitational force mashed her cabin passengers brutally and crushed two fatally. It was a question of saving as many as possible. The only one for whom she had any concern was Jennan and she was in desperate terror about his safety. Airless and uncooled, protected by only one layer of metal, not three, the airlock was not going to be safe for the four trapped there, despite their spacesuits. These were only the standard models, not built to withstand the excessive heat to which the ship would be subjected.

Helva ran as fast as she could but the incredible wave of heat

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from the explosive sun caught them halfway to cold safety.

She paid no head to the cries, moans, pleas and prayers in her cabin. She listened only to Jennan's tortured breathing, to the missing throb in his suit's purefying system and the sucking of the overloaded cooling unit. Helpless, she heard the hysterical screams of his three companions as they writhed in the awful heat. Vainly, Jennan tried to calm them, tried to explain they would soon be safe and cool if they could be still and endure the heat. Undisciplined by their terror and torment, they tried to strike out at him despite the close quarters. One flailing arm became entangled in the leads to his power pack and the damage was quickly done. A connection, weakened by heat and the dead weight of the arm, broke.

For all the power at her disposal, Helva was helpless. She watched as Jennan fought for his breath, as he turned his head beseechingly towards *her*, and died.

Only the iron conditioning of her training prevented Helva from swinging around and plunging back into the cleansing heart of the exploding sun. Numbly she made rendezvous with the refugee convoy. She obediently transferred her burned, heat-prostrated passengers to the assigned transport.

"I will retain the body of my scout and proceed to the nearest base for burial," she informed Central dully.

"You will be provided escort," was the reply.

"I have no need of escort," she demurred.

"Escort is provided, XH-834," she was told curtly.

The shock of hearing Jennan's initial severed from her call number cut off her half-formed protest. Stunned, she waited by the transport until her screens showed the arrival of two other slim brain ships. The cortege proceeded homeward at unfunereal speeds.

"834? The ship who sings?"

"I have no more songs."

"Your scout was Jennan."

"I do not wish to communicate."

"I'm 422."

"Silvia?"

"Silvia died a long time ago. I'm 422. Currently MS," the ship rejoined curtly. "AH-640 is our other friend, but Henry's not listening in. Just as well—he wouldn't understand it if you wanted to turn rogue. But I'd stop *him* if he tried to delay you."

"Rogue?" the term snapped Helva out of her apathy.

"Sure. You're young. You've got power for years. Skip. Others have done it. 732 went rogue two years ago after she lost her scout on a mission to that white dwarf. Hasn't been seen since."

"I never heard about rogues," gasped Helva.

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"As it's exactly the thing we're conditioned against, you sure wouldn't hear about it in school, my dear," 422 said.

"Break conditioning?" cried Helva, anguished, thinking longingly of the white, white furious hot heart of the sun she had just left.

"For you I don't think it would be hard at the moment," 422 said quietly, her voice devoid of her earlier cynicism. "The stars are out there, winking."

"Alone?" cried Helva from he heart.

"Alone!" 422 confirmed bleakly.

Alone with all of space and ime. Even the Horsehead Nebulae would not be far enough away to daunt her. Alone with a hundred years to live with her memories and nothing . . . nothing more.

"Was Parsaea worth it?" she asked 422 softly.

"Parsaea?" 422 came back, surprised. "With his father? Yes. We were there, at Parsaea when we were needed. Just as you . . . and his son . . . were at Chloe. When you were needed. The crime is always not knowing where need is and not being there."

"But *I* need *him*. Who will supply my need?" said Helva bitterly. . . .

"834," said 422 after a day's silent speeding, "Central wishes your report. A replacement awaits your opt at Regulus Base. Change course accordingly."

"A replacement?" That was certainly not what she needed . . . a reminder inadequately filling the void Jennan left. Why, her hull was barely cool of Chloe's heat. Atavistically, Helva wanted time to mourn Jennan.

"Oh, none of them are impossible if *you're* a good ship," 422 remarked philosophically. "And it is just what you need. The sooner the better."

"You told them I wouldn't go rogue, didn't you?" Helva said heavily.

"The moment passed you even as it passed me after Parsaea, and before that, after Glen Arhur, and Betelgeuse."

"We're conditioned to go on, aren't we? We *can't* go rogue. You were testing."

"Had to. Orders. Not even Psycho knows why a rogue occurs. Central's very worried, and so, daughter, are your sister ships. I asked to be your escort. I . . . don't want to lose you both."

In her emotional nadir, Helva could feel a flood of gratitude for Silvia's rough sympathy.

"We've all known this grief, Helva. It's no consolation but if we couldn't feel with our scouts, we'd only be machines wired for sound."

Helva looked at Jennan's still

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form stretched before her in its shroud and heard the echo of his rich voice in the quiet cabin.

"Silvia! I *couldn't* help him," she cried from her soul.

"Yes, dear. I know," 422 murmured gently and then was quiet.

The three ships sped on, wordless, to the great Central Worlds base at Regulus. Helva broke silence to acknowledge landing instructions and the officially tendered regrets.

The three ships set down simultaneously at the wooded edge where Regulus' gigantic blue trees stood sentinel over the sleeping dead in the small Service cemetery. The entire Base complement approached with measured step and formed an aisle from Helva to the burial ground. The honor detail, out of step, walked slowly into her cabin. Reverently they placed the body of her dead love on the wheeled bier, covered it honorably with the deep blue, star-splashed flag of the Service. She watched as it was driven slowly down the living aisle which closed in behind the bier in last escort.

Then, as the simple words of interment were spoken, as the atmosphere planes dipped wings in tribute over the open grave, Helva found voice for her lonely farewell.

Softly, barely audible at first, the strains of the ancient song of evening and requiem swelled to the final poignant measure until black space itself echoed back the sound of the song the ship sang.

Give to

RED CROSS

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We are grateful to Lee Grimes of Oxnard, California for calling our attention to this Robert Graves account of a man afflicted with an unfortunate capacity for thoughtless kleptomania, and with another minor fault which led to a somewhat unusual sort of punishment.

DEAD MAN'S BOTTLES

by Robert Graves

I WAS MORE AMUSED THAN shocked when I first realized that I was a matchbox- and pencil-pocketer: it seemed a harmless enough form of absent-mindedness. Why matchbox- and pencil-pocketers—the aberrancy is quite a common one—should not also take cigarette lighters and fountain pens, no psychologist has been able to explain, but in practice they never do. Another odd thing about them is that, however slow and stupid on other occasions, they are quick as lightning and as cunning as weasels when they go into action.

'Sign, please!' the errand boy would call at the door of my flat in Hammersmith Mall, and when I came out, fumbling half-heartedly in my pockets for a pencil, he would offer me his. Then, after scribbling my name on the chit, I would perform some ingenious sleight of hand—but exactly how and what must remain unknown, because I never caught myself at it. All I can say is that he went off whistling, convinced that the pencil was back behind his ear, while I retired indoors with a clear conscience; and that, when I emptied my pockets before going to bed, the nasty chewed stub of indelible was there, large as life, along with other more handsome trophies. As for matches: I would stop a stranger in the street, politely ask for a light, strike a match on the box he offered and, after hypnotizing him (and myself) into the belief that I had returned it, thank him and stroll slowly off. I often wonder what a film-take of the incident would have shown.

Pencils are cheap, matches are cheaper still. My friends remained seemingly unaware of my depredations, or at any rate never ac-

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cused me of them, until one Easter I went to stay at Kirtlington, near Oxford, with one F. C. C. Borley, a Wadham don who lectured on moral philosophy and was an expert on French literature and wine.

Borley was youngish, with an unwholesome complexion, lank hair, and so disagreeable a voice and manner that he literally had not a friend in the world—unless one counted me, and neither of us really liked the other. His fellow dons couldn't stand him, though he had a well-stored and accurate mind, praiseworthy loyalty to the College, and no obvious vices—except to dress like a stage Frenchman and always to be in the right. He gave them the creeps, they said, and agreed that his election had been a major disaster. I had met him by chance on a walking tour in Andalusia, where I nursed him through an illness because nobody else was about; and now I was helping him with the typescript of a book he had written on drinking-clubs at the English Universities. I never pretended to compete with him in vintage scholarship or to share his rhetorical raptures over such and such a glorious port-wine year—Borley always chose to call it 'port wine'—or the peculiar and Elysian bouquet of this or that little known *Château*. And never let on that, in fact, I considered port primarily an invalid's drink and preferred an honest Spanish red wine or brandy to the most cultivated French. The only subject on which I claimed to be knowledgeable was sherry, a wine singled out for praise in the Fellows' grace at Wadham, and therefore not to be lightly disregarded by Borley, even though it meant nothing to his palate.

He had a Savoyard chef called Plessis whose remarkable ragouts and crêmes and soufflés these elegant wines served well enough to wash down. Out of respect for Plessis I never contradicted Borley or listened with anything but close attention to his endless dissertations on food, wine, the French classics, and eighteenth-century drinking habits. In exchange, he accepted my suggested amendments to his book readily enough wherever style, not fact, was in question; but that was because I had left him his affectations and perverse punctuation and everything else that gave the book its unpleasant, personal flavour, and concentrated merely on cutting out irrelevancies and repetitions and taking him up on the finer points of grammar.

Over coffee and brandy one evening, when our work on the book was all but finished, he suddenly unmasked his batteries. 'Fellow drinker,' he said—he had a nauseating habit of calling people 'fellow drinker' at table and 'fellow gamester' at cards—'I

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have a crow to pluck with you, and what could be a more suitable time than this?'

'Produce your bird,' I answered, and then in a pretty good imitation of Borley himself: 'When we've plucked, singed, and gutted it like good scullions, and set aside the tail feathers for pipe-cleaners, we'll summon Plessis from his cabinet and leave him to the fulfilment of his genius. I have no doubt but he'll stuff the carrion with prunes soaked in rose water, chopped artichoke hearts, paprika, and grated celeriac—then stew gently in a swaddling of cabbage leaves and serve with hot *mousseron* sauce . . . What wine shall we say, fellow drinker? *Maître Corbeau, 1921?* Or something with even more body?'

But Borley was not to be sidetracked. 'Frankly,' he continued, jutting out his pointed chin with its silly black imperial, 'it goes against my conscience as a host to make the disclosure, but *in vino veritas*, you know: you're a damned thief!'

I flushed. 'Go and count your German-silver teaspoons, check your forged fore-edge paintings, send Mme Plessis upstairs to go through my linen in search of your absurd Sulka neckties. There's not an object in this house that I'd accept as a gift, except some of your sherry—though not all of that. Your taste in furnishings and *objets d'art* is almost as bad as your manners, or your English grammar.'

He was prepared for some such comeback and met it calmly. 'Yesterday, friend Reginald Massie,' he said pompously, 'you stole every match I possessed. Today I sent to the grocer for another packet of a dozen boxes. Tonight there's only a single box left, that one on the mantelpiece . . . Just Heavens, and now that too has disappeared! It was there two minutes ago, I'd stake my reputation—and I never saw you leave your chair! However, nobody's come in, so pray hand it over!'

He was trembling with passion. Caught on the wrong foot, I began emptying my trouser pockets, and out came the matchboxes; but, I was glad to see, no more than seven of them.

'There,' I said, 'count! You lie; I did not take the whole dozen. Where are the other five? I believe you're a match-pocketer yourself.'

'You were courteous enough to change for dinner,' he reminded me. 'The rest of the loot will be found in your tennis trousers. And now for the pencils!"

I felt in my breast pocket and pulled out eight or nine. 'The perquisites of my profession,' I explained lightly. 'Think of the trouble I've taken in correcting your illiterate English, not to mention your more than sketchy Spanish. I needed a whole fistful of pencils.

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You'd probably have had them all back before I left.'

'Tell me, how often in your life have you either returned a borrowed pencil or bought a new one?"

'I can't say offhand. But once, at a Paddington book stall, I remember . . .'

'Yes, felonious Massie, I can well picture the scene. Just before the train started you asked the attendant to show you an assortment of propelling-pencils, drew your purse, made a couple of passes and, hey presto, levanted with the whole tray.'

'I have never in my life pocketed a propelling-pencil. That would be theft. You insult me.'

'It's about time someone did, fellow drinker! What a petti-fogging rogue you are, to be sure. Convinced that nobody's going to haul you into Court for the sake of a penny pencil or a ha'penny matchbox, you lose all sense of decency and filch wholesale. Now, if you were to set your covetous eyes on something only a little larger and more valuable, such as, as—let us say this corkscrew—'

'I wouldn't be found dead with that late-Victorian monstrosity!"

'—I repeat, with this corkscrew, I'd have a trifle more respect for you. But you stick to your own mean lay. In the criminal world, *on dit*, William Sikes, the master burglar, looks down his nose at the ignoble sneak thief and tuppenny tapper. William's scorn for you, O lower than Autolycus, would be an easterly blast to wither every flower in the summer's garden of your self-esteem.' He leaned back in his ornate chair, placed the tips of his fingers together and eyed me malevolently.

It is a fallacy that good wine makes one less drunk than bad wine. Borley would never have dared to talk to me like that if he hadn't had a skinful of his special Pommard; and if I hadn't been matching him glass for glass I should probably have kept my temper. I'd once heard him remark after a post-mortem at a North Oxford bridge table: '. . . *And if* the King of Hearts had worn a brassière and pink bloomers, he'd have been a Queen! So what, fellow gamesters?' But there was no *And if* on this occasion.

Frowning, I poured myself another brandy, tossed it over his shirt front, and then tweaked his greasy nose until it bled. I ought to have remembered that he had a weak heart; but then, of course, so ought he.

Borley died ten days later, after a series of heart attacks. Nobody knew about the tweaked nose—it isn't the sort of thing the victim boasts about—and though I think Plessis and his wife guessed from the brandy on their master's clothes that there had been a

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brawl, they did not bring the matter up. They benefited unexpectedly from the will: a legacy of a thousand pounds, free of death duties. To me, in spite of my disparagement of his wine, Borley left 'the Worser Part' of his cellar —it was another of his affectations to capitalize almost every other word—while 'the Better' was to go to Wadham Senior Common Room. I had also been appointed his sole executor, which entailed a great deal of tiresome work: it fell to me to organize his funeral and act as chief mourner. The bulk of his estate went to a second cousin, a simple-minded Air Force officer at Banbury, who took one look at the Kirtlington house, pulled a comic face, and took the next train back. The will, I should mention, had been a last-minute scrawl on the flyleaf of a cookery book, which was grudgingly accepted for probate because the nurse and doctor had witnessed it and the intentions were clear enough.

I felt a bit guilty about Borley. Once or twice in the course of the next few weeks I had a novel twinge of conscience when I stowed away my day's catch of pencils and matches in the bottom drawer of my desk. Then one day a letter came from Dick and Alice Semphill reminding me that I was to spend a yachting holiday with them in August, and that *Psyche* would be found moored in Oulton Broad on the fifteenth, if that suited me. I wrote back that I'd be there without fail, accompanied by a dozen of Borley's burgundies and clarets which, though the 'Worser Part' of his cellar, were well worth drinking; and a bottle or two of my own Domecq Fundador brandy.

Psyche is a comfortable craft, though rather slow, and the Semphills were glad to see me again. Both of them are mad on sailing. Dick's an architect and Alice and I once nearly got married when we were both under age; we're still a little more than friends. I think that's all I need say about them here.

The first night in the saloon, just before supper, eight-year-old Bunny Semphill watched me produce a bottle of Beaujolais and offered to uncork it. But he found the job too stiff for him, so I had to finish it.

As I was twisting the cork from the corkscrew, I started as though I had been stung. 'Bunny,' I asked, 'where the deuce did this come from?'

He stared at me. 'I don't know, Mr. Massie. I took it from the rack behind you.'

'Dick,' I called, trying not to sound scared, 'where did you get this ivory-handled corkscrew?'

Dick, busy mixing the salad in the galley, called back: 'I didn't know we possessed such a thing.

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I always use the one on my pocket knife.'

'Well, what's this?' And I showed it to him.

'Never set eyes on it until now.'

Neither, it proved, had Alice Semphill or Captain Murdoch, an Irish Guardsman who was the fifth member of the party.

'You look as though you'd seen a ghost,' said Alice. 'What's so extraordinary about the corkscrew, Reggie? Have you come across it before?'

'Yes: it belonged to the chap who bequeathed me the wine. But the trouble is that it wasn't part of the bequest. I can't make out how it got here.'

'You must have brought it along by mistake. Perhaps it got stuck into one of the bottle covers.'

'I'd have seen it when I packed them.'

'Not necessarily.'

'Besides, who put it on the rack?'

'Probably yourself. You know, Reggie, you do a lot of pretty absent-minded things. For instance, you pinched all our matches almost as soon as you came aboard. Not that I grudge you them in the least; but I mean . . .'

'How do you know? Did you see me pick up so much as a single box?'

'No, I can't honestly say I did. But I was wildly looking for a light and saw your raincoat hanging up and tapped the pockets, and they positively rattled . . .'

'I brought a lot of matches with me. Useful contribution, I thought . . .'

She let that go with a warning grimace. But the corkscrew mystery remained unsolved. I sincerely hoped that I hadn't suddenly become a major thief, as Borley had wished I would. It might land me in a police court—and eventually in a home for kleptomaniacs. I picked up the corkscrew, which I'd have recognized in a million. It was a stout eighteen-eightyish affair, with an ivory handle and a brush at one end, I suppose for whisking away the cobwebs from the necks of 1847 port bottles.

'Who were the people who chartered *Psyche* last week?' I asked.

'The Greenyer-Thoms; friends of Dick's brother-in-law George. He's an estate agent; she paints. They live near Banbury.'

'Aha!' I said, 'that explains it. They must have been at the sale of Borley's effects. The principal legatee is his Air Force cousin, who lives there.'

'Violent T.T. types, the Greenyer-Thoms, both of them,' Alice objected.

'Secret drinkers,' I countered, replacing the corkscrew on the rack. 'That's why they wanted the yacht. It's easy to dispose of the empties; just drop them into the water under cover of night.'

After supper Murdoch asked me jocosely whether he might be

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allowed to smell the cork of one of my famous brandies. I roused myself from a dark-brown study, fetched a bottle, and reached for the corkscrew. It was not on the rack. I glanced sharply from face to face and asked: 'Who's hidden it?"

They all looked up in surprise, but nobody spoke.

'I put it back on the rack and now it's gone. Hand it over, Bunny! You're playing a dangerous game. I'm foolishly sensitive about that corkscrew.'

'I haven't touched it, Mr. Massie—drop dead, I haven't—I swear!'

'Tap Massie's pockets, Mrs. Semphill,' Murdoch invited. 'They're positively wriggling with corkscrews.'

Dick caught a nose-tweaking glint in my eye. 'Gentlemen, gentlemen!' he cried warningly. Then he pulled out his pocket knife. '—This will do, Reggie,' he said.

Dick's a decent fellow.

As I silently uncorked the brandy, Bunny went down on his hands and knees and searched among our feet. Then he rummaged among the cushions behind us.

'*Couldn't* it be in one of your pockets, Mr. Massie?' he asked at last.

'Certainly not!' I snapped. 'And for God's sake don't fidget so, child! Go on deck if you're bored with adult conversation.'

'I was only trying to help.'

'Well, don't try so hard.'

Alice didn't like the way I pitched into the boy and came to his rescue. 'I really think he had a right to ask you that,' she said. 'Especially as I can see the end of my best drawing pencil peeping out of your breast pocket.'

'It's not yours, woman; it's mine!'

'Let me umpire this tug of war,' said Murdoch. 'I'm the fairest-minded man in all East Anglia.'

'Keep out of this, Murdoch!' I warned him.

'Oh, forget it, chaps, for Christ's sake!' said Dick. 'If we're going to squabble about matches and pencils on the very first night of our sail . . .'

Under the influence of the Domecq, which everyone praised, we soon recovered our self-possession—but half an hour later, when we had finished washing up and were going on deck, Bunny looked at me curiously.

'Who hung the corkscrew on that hook?' he asked, 'Did you?'

'Captain Murdoch has a devious sense of humour,' I told him, 'and if you find yourself catching it, lay off!' But a cold shiver went through me and I stayed below for a supplementary drink. The blasted thing was dangling from a hook above the galley door. If I had been sure who the practical joker was, I'd have heaved him overboard.

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For the sake of peace Dick must have asked the others not to comment on the corkscrew's reappearance, because the next day there was an eloquent silence, unbroken by myself, when I borrowed Dick's knife to uncork another bottle of claret. But for the rest of the holiday I was careful to go through my pockets, morning, afternoon, and night, to make sure that I had left enough matches and pencils lying about for general use. I had a superstitious feeling that, if I did, the corkscrew would stay on its hook. And I was right.

I am a little vague about where we went, or what weather we had; but I know that when the time came to say goodbye, Alice couldn't resist asking: 'Haven't you forgotten your trick corkscrew? It's still hanging up in the saloon.'

'No,' I said. 'It isn't mine and never was. The Greenyer-Thoms left it here. Anyhow, *Psyche* can do with an ivory-handled corkscrew.'

'Thank you,' said Alice quizzically. 'But I don't think Borley intended it for us.'

That evening, back in my flat, I found that in the hurry of my departure I had forgotten to frisk myself for matches and pencils. Among the day's collection I found an outsize box of Swan Vestas boldly marked in ink *John Murdoch, his property; please return to the Guards Club,* and Alice's double-B Koh-i-Noor pencil with her initials burned on it—with a red-hot knitting needle?—at both ends and in the middle. This made me cross. 'Bunny must have planted them on me,' I reassured myself. 'It couldn't have been Murdoch—he went off yesterday morning—and Alice wouldn't have been so unkind.'

'Nice gentlemanly corkscrew you've brought back, sir,' my Mrs. Fiddle remarked as she bustled in with the soup.

'Oh, I have, have I?' I almost yelled. 'Then throw it out of the window!'

She looked at me with round, reproachful eyes. 'Oh, sir, I could never do such a thing, Mr. Massie, sir. You can't buy a corkscrew like that nowadays.'

I jumped up. 'Then I'll have to throw it away myself. Where is it?'

'On the pantry shelf, next to the egg cups,' she answered resignedly, picking up my fallen napkin. 'But it seems such wicked waste.'

'*Where* did you say it was?' I called from the pantry. 'I don't see it.'

'Come back, Mr. Massie, and eat your soup while it's hot,' she pleaded. 'The corkscrew can wait its turn, surely?'

Not wanting to look ridiculous, I came back and restrained myself until dessert, when I asked her curtly to fetch the thing.

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She was away some little time and showed annoyance when she returned.

'You're making game of me, sir. You've hid that corkscrew; you know you have.'

'I have done nothing of the sort, Mrs. Fiddle.'

'There's only the two of us in the flat, sir,' she said, pursing her lips.

'Correct, Mrs. Fiddle. And if you want the corkscrew yourself, you're welcome to it, so long as you don't bring it back here. I should, of course, have offered it to Mr. Fiddle before I talked of throwing it out of the window.'

'Are you accusing me of hiding it with intent to deceive you, Mr. Massie?'

'Didn't you accuse *me* of that, just now?'

The thrust went home. 'I didn't mean anything rude, sir, I'm sure,' she said, weakening.

'I should hope not. But, tell me, Mrs. Fiddle, are you certain you saw a corkscrew? What was it like?'

'Ivory-handled, sir, with a sort of shaving brush at one end, and a little round silver plate set in the other with some initials and a date.'

This was too much. 'That's the one,' I muttered, 'but, upon my word, I never noticed the initials.'

"Well, look again, Mr. Massie, and see if I'm not right,' she said. And then, plaintively, as she retired into the kitchen, with her apron to her eyes: 'But you oughtn't to pull my leg, sir! I take things so seriously, ever since my little Shirley died.'

I poured her a drink, and we made peace.

Next day the corkscrew turned up in the pantry at the back of the napkin drawer. Mrs. Fiddle produced it in triumph. 'Here it is, sir. Now see if I wasn't right about the initials.'

I took it gingerly from her, and there was the silver plate all right. I couldn't understand how I had missed it. *F.C.C.B. 1928*, the silver slightly tarnished.

'Yes, sir, it could do with a nice rub-up.'

I saw no way out of this awkward situation but to earn credit as a practical joker. 'The fact is,' I blustered, 'I bought it at Lowestoft as a present for Mr. Fiddle. I didn't intend you to see it, and that's why I made a bit of a mystery of the whole affair. I meant to keep it for his birthday. First of next month, isn't it?'

'No, sir. Fiddle's birthday was the first of last month. Very kind of you, sir, all the same, I'm sure.'

But she still seemed dissatisfied. 'Fiddle isn't a wine or spirit-drinker, sir,' she explained after a pause, 'and bottled beer comes with screw tops these days.'

'How very stupid of me! All right, let's chuck it out of the window, after all.'

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'Oh, no, sir! You might hurt someone passing in the street. Besides, it's a nice article. Keep it for yourself, and give Fiddle a couple of bottles of stout, instead. He'd take that very kindly, though belated. And so would I, if it comes to that, Mr. Massie, sir.'

Late that evening, with a neat package in my hand, I walked along the Mall until I came to Hammersmith Bridge. When no one was about, I hurled it into midstream. What a load off my mind! But that night I dreamed that a nasty looking corpse floating in the water had grabbed the parcel just as it sank and shouted to me to come back and collect my property. He rose dripping from the Thames; it was F. C. C. Borley himself. I turned and fled screaming towards the Broadway, but he came after me. 'It's yours, you damned thief!' he bawled. 'Wait! I've brought it!' And then, as a parting shot, heard indistinctly through the rumble of traffic: 'And the Worser Part (Bins K to T) for Mr. Reginald Massie.' That was the operative phrase in his will.

I awoke with chattering teeth, jumped out of bed, switched on all the lights in the flat, poured myself a stiff drink, and went along to see whether the corkscrew were back again on the pantry hook. Thank God, it wasn't!

I repacked my suitcase and read myself to sleep again.

In the morning when Mrs. Fiddle brought my tea I told her that I had been rung up by another set of yachting friends in South Devon, and was catching the morning train there. I'd send her a wire to let her know when I was returning, and what to do with my letters. This was nothing unusual; I frequently leave home on a sudden impulse.

I booked for Brixham, where I knew that a regatta was in progress. Also, a bachelor uncle of mine lived on the hill overlooking the harbour: an ex-Marine colonel whom I had not seen for years and whose chief interest was British freshwater molluscs. We exchanged cards at Christmas and his were always superscribed: 'Come and visit a lonely old man.' I thought: 'Here's my chance to show a little family feeling; besides, all the pubs are sure to be full because of the regatta.'

Uncle Tim was delighted to see me and discuss his molluscs and his rheumatism. That evening he took me in a taxi to the Yacht Club for an early supper. 'You look depressed, my boy,' he said, 'and not too well in spite of your holiday. You ought to get married. Man isn't meant to live by himself. Marriage would tone you up and give you a motive in life.' He added sadly: 'I put it off too long. Molluscs and marriage don't go together. Children would have played the deuce with my aquarium and cabinets.'

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'Oh, they grow up,' I said airily. 'Seven years' patience, and your collection would have been safe enough.'

'You may be right; but the poor little blighters couldn't wait.'

'Who? The children?'

'No, no, stupid! The molluscs!'

'I beg your pardon. But why ever not?'

'River pollution: those confounded chemical manures washed off the soil, you know. A regular massacre of the innocents: whole species destroyed every year.'

I shook my head in sympathy.

'But there's nothing to prevent *you* from marrying, is there?' he persisted.

'I collect matchboxes,' I answered, rattling my pockets gloomily. 'Mine is one of the finest collections in Europe. It would hardly be fair to bring up children among so much incendiary material, would it?'

Presently Uncle Tim, reaching for the menu, said that his rheumatism be damned: with our Dover sole and roast chicken we'd have a bottle of the Club's famous hock, tacitly reserved for resident members. 'I know that you appreciate a sound wine, Reginald,' he said. 'Not many young men do, with all these confounded mixed drinks about. Gin and vermouth—gin and tonic—gin and bitters: that's what it's come to. Even in the Navy. Pollution, I call it!' He finished enigmatically: 'Whole species destroyed every year.'

'Did you ever come across a youngster called Borley?' he went on. 'Chap I met once, here at the Club. He wore a floppy hat and an absurd tie like a Frenchman; said he was writing a book. A mind like a corkscrew—went round and round, and in and in, and then pop! out would come something wet. But, for all that, he had a remarkable knowledge of wine; and consented to approve of our hock.'

A waiter tiptoed in, cradling the bottle, and ceremoniously dusted its neck with the brush at the end of an ivory-handled corkscrew. 'I've brought it, fellow drinker,' he whispered with a confidential leer.

'Good heavens, boy!' cried Uncle Tim. 'What's amiss? Are you taken ill?'

I had dashed out of the Club, and was half running, half flying down the slope to the Fish Market. The evening crowds in Fore Street blocked my way, but I swerved and zigzagged through them like a wing three-quarter.

'Hey, Reggie, stop!' a woman shouted almost in my ear.

I handed her off and darted across the narrow street, where I found myself firmly tackled around the waist.

'For God's sake, Reggie, what's the hurry? Have you murdered someone?'

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It was Dick Semphill! I stopped struggling and gaped at him. 'Come into this café and tell Alice and me what's happened.'

I followed him in, still gaping, and sat down. 'What on earth are you doing in Brixham?' I asked, when I found my voice.

'The regatta, of course,' Alice answered.

'But why aren't you up in Lowestoft?'

'That's not till next month. We've been here since Friday. *Psyche's* not distinguished herself yet, but there's still hope.'

'*Psyche*? But she can't possibly have sailed from Suffolk in the time!'

'I don't know what you're driving at. She's not been in the Broads since last year. You're coming up there next month—at least we hope you are—and we're going to have a wonderful time. By the way, you haven't yet told us whether Oulton Broad on the fifteenth suits you.'

'Where's Bunny?'

'At school in Somerset. Murdoch will collect him when he breaks up.'

'Dick—Alice, I believe I'm going off my head.' I told them the whole story from the beginning, even making a clean breast of the matchbox business. They both looked thoroughly uncomfortable when I had finished.

Alice said: 'Obviously, it was a dream, but I can't make out exactly at what point it began and ended. Listen: I'll ring up the Yacht Club and find out if your Uncle Tim's there.'

The phone was close to our table. Presently I heard her say: 'You're sure? Not since last Tuesday? Laid up with rheumatism? Oh, I'm so sorry. No, no message. Thanks very much.'

She put back the receiver. 'It's not so bad, Reggie,' she said. 'You haven't let your uncle down. As a matter of fact, they don't serve meals at the Yacht Club; and the only cellar there is the commodore's personal bottle they keep under the counter. So your dream didn't end until Dick woke you up a moment ago. It was a bit more than a dream, of course; a sort of sleep walk, probably due to worrying about that chap Borley. Lucky we met you. Do you mind turning out your pockets, Reggie, dear? That may give us a clue to how long you've been away from your flat.'

I obeyed dazedly. Out came eight matchboxes of different sorts, seven pencils and, among other odds and ends, the return half of a railway ticket from Paddington, and an unposted letter to Alice herself, written from my flat and confirming the Oulton Broad rendezvous.

'You came down here only this afternoon,' she said, showing me the date on the ticket.

There was also a bulky envel-

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ope containing all the documents concerned with my winding-up of Borley's affairs. Alice ran through them. 'I see you duly delivered the wine to the Warden and Fellows of Wadham College,' she said. 'And here's the itemized bill for the funeral at Kirtlington Parish Church. Oh, and a note from Squadron Leader Borley of Banbury, saying that if you'd like any souvenir from his cousin's effects before the auctioneer disposes of them, you're very welcome, but will you please let him know as soon as possible. He wrote on Thursday; I don't suppose you've answered him yet. Hullo, here's a photostat of the will itself! What beastly wriggly writing! Yes, its witnessed by—'

Dick had kept quiet all this time. Now he grabbed the will and read it. 'It's all right, Reggie,' he said. 'You've not gone nuts, and we won't even have to get you psychoanalyzed. You've merely been haunted—by a ghost which it ought to be easy enough to lay.' Then he burst out: 'You dolt, why didn't you take the trouble to find out whether your friend Borley was a Protestant or a Catholic?'

'I did take a great deal of trouble, but nobody knew. Even the College couldn't tell me, so I followed the line of least resistance and had him buried C. of E.'

'Exactly. That's what all the trouble's been about! You see now why in your dream he called you a damned thief?'

'I don't understand.'

'Read the will again. Read it aloud!'

I read:

> 'I appoint Reginald Massie to be my executor . . . the Better Part of my Cellar (Bins A to J) are for the Warden and Fellows of Wadham College, Oxford. The Worser Part (Bins K to T) are for Mr. Reginald Massie . . .

'Not *"for Mr. Reginald Massie,"* idiot; if he'd meant you he'd have written "the said Reginald Massie." It's *"for the Requisite Masses"!* Masses for his soul's repose, don't you see?'

The exhumation was not easy to wangle, but I got it fixed up in the end. Then I handed over the wine to the St. Aloysius people at Oxford and they agreed to do the rest. And on Alice's insistence, I wrote to Squadron Leader Borley, asking for the corkscrew as a keepsake. Since he sent it I haven't pocketed a single matchbox or pencil—so far as I know, that is . . .

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Washington got a bomb, in the days when the young ruled, and the Hypos knew they had to get it before the Judas gang did something with it that would start the last rumble . . .

JUDAS BOMB

by Kit Reed

IT HAPPENED, IN THE DAYS when the young ruled, that Washington got a bomb. The Hypos found out about it when one of the Judas Gang got swell-headed and started to brag. He stepped over the marker into Hypo country around Delaware, and the Hypos got him and he didn't brag any more. Little Easter, Franko's man, took care of him, and while Little Easter was working on him he said the Hypos had better lay off because Washington knew where he was, and Washington had a bomb. Little Easter finished what he was doing and then he told Franko and the Hypos held a council of war.

From Buffalo and Philadelphia and Albany the Hypos came, and they parked their 'cicles in ramshackle Rockefeller Center, Franko's pad, and they parleyed, sitting crosslegged in the deserted square where skaters had glided before the gangs moved out of the neighborhoods into the city and the country and the world. They sat, in silver-sheen jackets sewn for them by the squares, and they talked about the bomb, oblivious of the beer cans, the garbage, the cigarette butts that littered the ground and piled high in the corners.

Franko said, "You know what they're gonna do with that bomb."

Netta Rampo was tall and broad and tough. She was from Trenton, and she ran the Hypettes. She made a gesture. "That's what they'll do."

"Oh, man, worse'n that. They're not gonna use it on us. We don't bug them half as much as the Comradskis. They'll find a way to drop it over there. Then—" Franko ground his boot heel into Netta Rampo's hand. "That's what'll happen to us." She didn't even wince. "It'll be the last rumble, man. We'll get it from all over—Kiev, Leningrad, Peiping —they'll be plantin' bombs like appleseed, and it'll be the end."

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Billy from Philly, sprawled on his elbows, kicked at the dirt. "So?"

"So we gotta stop 'em." Automatically, Franko zipped and unzipped his jacket. Twenty heads turned toward him. Twenty pairs of eyes coldly looked him up and down. "We gotta get a bomb. We gotta get *that* bomb."

They talked long into the night, and it was decided that one of them would have to do the job—alone. They wrangled on, and every once in a while one of them would interrupt Franko and Little Easter would get him and it would be very quiet after that.

"Okay," Franko said at dawn. "We gotta decide who's going. Netta's out because she's a girl."

"Bug you," Netta said.

"So it's gotta be one of us guys. We'll face off for it. Guy that's still standing up at the end gets the job. I'll take on any one of you guys, starting now. Anybody . . ."

"Forget it, Franko." A dark form stood up.

In the dimness, Little Easter started forward. "Nobody interrupts Franko . . ."

Franko pulled him back.

"Except Johnny Fairhair." Fair-haired Johnny was big, bigger than Netta Rampo, and he was sturdy as a rhino and muscled like a bull. He had big, black eyes and the ugliest face in Christendom, and to his shoulders fell hair as pale and silky as that of a child. "Forget it, Franko." He headed for his 'cicle, parked in a corner of the rink. "I'll go."

Billy from Philly looked after him and said softly, "Just as well. He's nearly twenty. He's almost through."

Without seeming to look at him, Johnny wheeled and threw his knife. It stuck in the back of Billy from Philly's hand.

He set out for Washington without a weapon or a plan, traveling until the brightness of the dawn warned him to take his 'cicle down. He set down at a deserted landmark, the last Howard Johnson's on the Jersey Turnpike, stepping carefully through the shattered glass front, looking into every possible hiding place before he settled down to sleep. Day fell, and the deserted building was silent, except for the occasional drone of a 'cicle overhead.

Outside, New Jersey stretched quiet and drab. In dull cities, squares worked under the eyes of the Hypos who lounged on catwalks, quick with knives and curses. The Hypos were only around when they felt like it, but the squares kept at it because sure as they flagged there'd be a Hypo around—because he felt like it. Squares and families of squares nested in sordid little villages of identical clapboard houses, living as quietly as possible, subdued by the terrifying brashness of youth.

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Aroused by the sound of soft breathing, Fairhaired Johnny lurched to his feet and closed his hands about a muscular throat. He shook himself awake and took a look at the person who stood, unmoving, between his hands.

"Oh, it's you." He tightened his grip a little.

"Lay off, Johnny. I come along to help." It was Netta Rampo. She raised heavy forearms and broke his hold.

He started to hit her.

"Wait a minute, Johnny. You got a plan?"

He lowered his head and kicked at a piece of glass.

"Okay." She drove her hands into her pockets and looked at him, all business. "I do. We cross the marker and grab a guy. Maybe I pretend I'm a Judy and go up to this guy and distract him, and you jump him. We make him tell us where the bomb is and we go on from there. Okay?"

He hesitated.

"It's more plan than you've got."

"Okay, Netta, you're on. But don't go getting yourself knocked off. You've got three good years left. You're only seventeen."

"Let's go to Squaresville and get a meal."

They stopped in one of the square villages—a miserable Levittown—and one of the nursewomen gave them some cake and cheese. They sprawled on the lawn, eating, and watched the neighborhood kids. Johnny, who had run in packs since his childhood, had never talked to another person alone. Sharing the food gave him a strange sense of intimacy. They began to talk.

"You grow up in a place like this?" Netta asked.

"From when I was two until I was old enough to join a pack. My old lady shot herself the same day my old man got his. He was a brave one." Johnny's eyes softened. "Did it with a belly-bomb—wiped out about fifty guys in a rumble with the Bishops' mob."

"I had a mother," Netta sneered. "The old lady didn't have the guts to die when Pop got his. Said she was only eighteen and she couldn't see cashing in just because it was time for Pop to die."

"You going to do that?"

"I'll die with my guy—if I ever get a guy—if I don't get one, I'll just go when it's time. I'll find a way." She spat.

"It's gonna be soon for me." Johnny looked thoughtful.

In the days when the young ruled, a guy was through at twenty, and he did the only decent thing a guy could do when his life was over. He went out in a rumble and got his, and if he couldn't do it that way he found some other way to die.

With girls it didn't matter so much. If they lived there were always kids they could raise. There had to be a lot of kids.

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You could spot the guy who was too chicken to die while you were still a kid, running in one of the neighborhood packs, and you never let him earn his jacket and become one of the gang. He stayed in Squaresville all his life and he worked his fool head off for you, because if he worked, and kept his nose clean, the gang might let him live. He got squarer and squarer. He got old.

Johnny and Netta were ready to go when a pack of kids spotted their jackets and came over, shrilling a thousand questions and jumping up and down. When they were on their 'cicles, the pair discovered that the kids had stolen Netta's knife. It made them proud.

They circled over the marker that divided the Hypos' territory from the land of the Judas Gang, and at dark they went over the Delaware River, looking for a scout from the other gang. They set down near a roadhouse, where noise and yellow light spilled out into the dark, and hid their 'cicles in the bushes. Crouched in the darkness, they watched the Judas guys and their Judys come out, two by two, and go into the shadows to neck. A guy came out alone, and Netta gave Johnny a dig in the ribs. He nodded and she stood up, reversing her jacket so the Hypo silver was turned to the inside, and made a low sound that could mean only one thing, no matter which gang you ran with. The Judas flipped a knife into the tree just behind Netta's head. She grinned.

"Well, well, well . . ." He ambled forward until he saw her face—then his lip crinkled in distaste and he started to back away, but it was too late. Johnny was on him. When they got him into the bushes Netta, remembering the look, hit him especially hard.

"Easy, or we'll never get anything out of him," Johnny said. Then, as she sat astride the Judas's chest, waiting for instructions, he said, "You were pretty good about that knife."

"Enh."

"Let's find out about the bomb." Johnny gave their prisoner's ear a twist. "Where's the bomb?"

"Bug you."

"Where'd you get the bomb?"

"Cash in."

He twisted a little harder, while Netta gave the Judas a well-calculated dig in the ribs. They kept at it until the Judas raised his head limply and said "Okay, okay. I'll tell. Knock it off."

"Well?"

"Got the bomb from Daddy-o." Johnny gave Netta a puzzled look and hit him again. "Daddy-o gave it to us. With that bomb, man, the Judas gang is on top!"

"Where is it?"

"Bug you."

They worked on him a little harder, and when they finished, he told them the bomb was in the

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center of Judas territory, and when Johnny applied a special hold he knew, he told them it was under guard in the safest spot in town—the top of the Washington Monument. When Johnny hit him again, he said the bomb was for the Comradskis, but the Hypos would get theirs, and the Dragons and the Bishops too, and man the Judas Gang would take over the world, because they had a bomb and there were more where that came from. Netta and Johnny asked him what he meant, but all he would say was "Ask Daddy-o."

Afterward they threw him in the bushes and took his jacket. Netta got a Judy before the girl even knew what had happened, and then she had a Judas jacket too.

It was nearly daylight when they got on their 'cicles again and there was no hurry. They didn't want to try the monument until after dark. They spent the day in Wilmington, hanging around the joints and finding out what they could find. Everybody seemed to know about the bomb and they talked about it with a frantic pride, but underneath the cockiness there seemed to be some sort of fear. Conversations were spotted with talk about the Big Bang, and the catchword in all the places was, "Ask Daddy-o."

Johnny picked a fight because there was nothing better to do. He flipped the elbows from under a guy propped at a bar and the two squared off. Johnny lunged with the wild joy of a Hypo feeling his stuff, and then he backed away.

"Creep. What's a matter with you?"

"I don't feel like it, man. Ask Daddy-o."

"Enh." Johnny waded in again, but the tangle was no fun. The Judas fought with a strange unsureness, like a man who is off his feed. When Johnny closed in on him he clawed frantically, baring sharp teeth like a cornered rabbit. Disgusted, Johnny flung him in a corner.

"You just watch it." The Judas's voice was high and hysterical. "Watch out for Daddy-o."

Johnny tried it several more places, but all he got was the same nervous, girlish scratching that left him puzzled and disgusted. He and Netta headed out of Wilmington and set down in Hyattsville for something to eat. A square served them at the cheap lunch counter, and when they finished their hamburgers and started to leave he said, "Don't I get paid?"

"Get *paid?* You crazy?" Johnny kicked in the front of the juke box. "Be glad that's not you."

The square watched him, but there was no fear in his eyes. Baffled by the man's calm, assured look, Johnny gave the juke box a final kick, grabbed a piece of cake from under a plastic cover and left.

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"Guy was pretty cool for a square," Netta said.

"Enh. It's these Judas guys. They ain't got the guts to do things right. No wonder they think they need a bomb."

"They won't have it much longer."

"Boy, from what I've seen, without that bomb this place'll be wide open.

"Ready for the Hypos to take over." Netta paused. "Or somebody."

Johnny shifted uneasily. Then his eyes brightened. "That'd be a rumble for sure. Wait'll Franko hears what chickens these guys have turned out to be."

It was nearing dark so they headed into Washington. Before long they spotted the monument and zeroed in to land on the Mall. The stone needle loomed, tall and pockmarked, in the soft half-darkness.

Johnny sank on the grass. "We better wait till it's dark."

Netta settled beside him. "Yeah."

"We'll leave the 'cicles here, so we can get to 'em in a hurry and get the bomb back to Franko. If anything happens to me, you take it and get back."

"Not as long as I can help you." She looked fierce in the twilight.

"You heard me. Get that thing to Franko. He wants it."

"He must want it real bad."

Musing, Johnny looked up at the monument. "Wonder what's inside."

"Few guys, probably. It oughta be some fight."

"You stay out of it unless I call you, huh?" He made his voice stern. "No use you cashing in—you got three good years left."

"The hell you say." Netta drove her fist into her hand several times. "Does it bug you bein' nineteen?"

"I'll cash in when it's time. Maybe tonight, if I have to, to get the bomb. Only one thing does bug me. Before I go, I'd like to have a girl. Maybe leave a kid."

"You don't have one now?" In the dark, Netta's heavy face glowed.

"Nope." Johnny sprawled, resting on his elbows. "But I know her, and I've watched her, and someday I'll get her." He threw his head back. "Franko's girl, all golden, like a tiger . . ."

"Oh." Her voice was small.

"Couple of guys comin' out over there. C'mon, Netta. It's time."

The two heavy forms, almost identical in the darkness, moved toward the opening to the monument. A bored Judas stood outside, idly flipping his knife into a plank. Johnny got him before he could pull the knife out for another throw.

Inside, there were two more. Moving as if the stolen Judas jackets belonged to them, Johnny and Netta flipped the two a casual

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greeting and started up the stairs. One of the Judas's called up.

"You say Moe said it was okay for you to come in?"

"Yeah. Said we could take a look at this crazy bomb."

"Well," the Judas said, "I dunno . . ."

"C'mon," his partner whined. "C'mon, let's go over to the locker and get a beer." They headed for a freezer in the long-disabled elevator and Netta and Johnny disappeared around a bend in the towering stone stairs.

They toiled up in total darkness, listening to the hollow sound of their feet rattle up and down the empty shaft. Once Netta tripped and fell against the wire netting that covered the elevator track, and Johnny took her arm. They went on and on until they rounded the last bend and dim light shone on the steps from doorway at the top. They stood in the half-darkness until their eyes were acclimated and then burst into the small stone room.

In a transparent casing on a square pedestal glowed the bomb. Johnny headed for it without even stopping to see who guarded it. Suddenly he felt something hard in his ribs.

"And who do you think you are?"

"Bug you," Johnny said, and he turned. "Wha-ah—"

The man with the gun had a hard face and a cool, grey eye. His hand was steady and he was ready to kill. He was old—almost forty. He was a square.

Johnny turned cold eyes on him. "Daddy-o?"

"Not just me. All of us."

Sternly, the man dug at his ribs. "I thought Daddy-o told you to stay away from this room. Daddy-o told you he'd watch the bomb for the Judas Gang.

"You think we're Judas, man?" Ignoring the gun, Johnny whipped off the jacket. "We're Hypos."

The square smiled thinly. "And I suppose you came up here to steal the bomb."

"Somethin' like that, man." Johnny backed away to stand beside Netta on the far side of the room. The man with the gun moved closer to them.

"You'll get your own bomb, Hypos. The sooner the better."

"From *squares*? Bug you."

"You'll get your bomb, because every other mob will have a bomb, just like the Judas gang." The square laughed. "You'll get your little present from us old guys. Us Daddy-os."

"We'll *blast* you, Daddy-o." Johnny ached to jump for the gun.

"Oh, no. You'll be just like the Judas gang. They think they control us, but they don't. They think they have the bomb, but they don't." He smiled. "They have us, and *we* have the bomb."

Johnny growled.

The square went on. "They

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sense that now, but they don't want to admit it. They sense it and it's put them off their feed. They don't even enjoy a good girl, or a good fight, because somehow the word's begun to spread that if they fight, or if they fool around too much, the bomb just *might* go off, and that would be too bad. They're *lucky* boys to get bombs from their Daddy-o." The man patted the casing of the bomb. "When we've given one to every other gang in this country we'll tell them whose bomb it *really* is."

He stepped closer to Johnny. "And they'll throw down their knives and their guns and their bats because they'll be afraid the bomb will go off."

He waved the gun at Johnny's nose. "And they'll stop terrorizing their elders for fear the bomb will go off."

He levelled the gun at Johnny's chest. "And they'll give the world back to their elders—" his finger began to tighten— "for fear the bomb will go off."

"The hell!" With a look Johnny couldn't interpret, Netta pushed him aside and threw herself on the gun. There was an explosion and she collapsed, carrying the man to the floor as she fell.

Johnny beat Daddy-o and he beat him and he beat him, and when there was nothing left to beat he started to pick up the bomb. Then he cursed and split the case that protected it and dismantled the bomb and destroyed the important parts of it, and began to carry Netta down the hundreds of shallow stone stairs. The Judas at the bottom took one look at his face and let him pass.

He buried Netta near the reflecting pond at the end of the Mall and stuck a piece of twisted wire at the top of the grave. It was all that was left of the trigger device of the bomb.

"I gotta tell Franko," he mumbled, flinging himself on his 'cicle and taking to the air. "We gotta stop the squares."

He heard the first rumblings of the news when he set down in New York, near battered Rockefeller center. "Got one . . ." "Daddy-o gave us one . . ." "Got . . ." "We got . . ."

Trembling, he raced through the deserted lobby into the room that was Franko's pad. "Hey, Franko, Franko, it's a trick . . . we gotta watch out for . . ."

Franko looked up at him and grinned. "We don't gotta watch out for nothing, Johnny boy. We got a bomb."

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Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: XXXVIII*

IT WAS BECAUSE OF AN argument with Ferdinand Feghoot that Richard Wagner was convicted of plagiarism in 2867. On a visit to Bayreuth, Feghoot had told him about the planet Madamabutterfry in the Twenty-Ninth Century, and how the natives believed that every grand opera idea had been stolen from them, and how they invariably proved it. Instantly, Wagner flew into a fury. "Only Teutonic ideas are goot for Grand Opera!" he stormed. "The rest iss all rubbish! Get your mazhine for shpace-time. Ve go to your planet. I vill show you!"

On Madamabutterfry, the Customs officials asked whether Wagner had anything to declare—any operas, acts, scenes, or arias—and he sneeringly gave them a list. Within minutes, they had him arrested, and a police official was offering to show him the themes he had pilfered.

Right at the spaceport, he was led to a vast, ancient tree with eye-buds and tentacle-tendrils. Every leaf drooped; its bark was dull, dry, and scaly; it rustled hopelessly at them. Near it was a pile of used spaceship parts and a sign saying:

ROOTBOTTOM STANLEY, THE EARTHMAN'S FRIEND!
BEST DEAL IN THE GALAXY!! ABSOLUTELY NOBEING UNDERSELLS ME!!!
GARFINKLES, TOP QUALITY 17.95! TODAY *ONLY* 8.95!
NEVER AGAIN! *1.97*!!!

Nearby was a little booth manned by a small, molelike people; its sign said simply:

GARFINKLES, SIX FOR A DIME.

"So tragic," murmured the policeman, "such a valuable theme."

"But vodt could I have written aboudt it?" roared Wagner.

"That's obvious," Feghoot said. *"Tree Stan Undersold."*

They went on to a cook-shop, where their escort showed them an enormous jar full of jam. Stretched over its top was a flat, rubbery organism with two mournful eyes and a mouth in the middle.

"Such a sadness," lamented the policeman, dabbing away at a tear. "With hunger he grasps at the jar, and so does his work. But if he is fed, then he will let go and sleep."

"Can't I *please* have some jam?" called a thin little voice. "Just a nibble, just one. Oh, how I long for it!"

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"I suspect," remarked Feghoot before Wagner could speak, "that this is the *Nibble-longing Lid.*"

Finally they were brought to the edge of an odorous bog, where a huge, froglike person was unhappily tying oysters to strings and dropping them into the water to marinate them. His topknot glowed fitfully with a faint, sickly light.

"This is most tragic of all," said the policeman. "Very artistic, nice to steal. No one buys now his bivalves. That is why his light-on-top cannot shine."

"An oudraitch!" screamed Wagner, leaping and frothing and tearing his hair. "It iss ridiculous! Vot iss this to me?"

"Dim Oyster Sinker," said Ferdinand Feghoot.

—GRENDEL BRIARTON

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* *This is a* Super-Feghoot. *We promise to publish no more than one* Super-Feghoot *a year.*—THE KINDLY EDITOR

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SCIENCE

Being an account of the Good Doctor's reasons for having written an occasional story about flying-saucers . . . while steadily and flatly disbelieving in the existence of the giddy things . . .

MY BUILT-IN DOUBTER

by Isaac Asimov

YESTERDAY I DELIVERED MYself of an oration before a small but select audience of non-scientists on the topic of "What is Science?"

I discoursed learnedly and amusingly, with all the aplomb and *savoir faire* for which I am so widely noted (and if the Kindly Editor refrains from a parenthesis here, I shall be surprised). [None, I think, is needed.—T.K.E.]

Having completed the talk, there came the question period and, bless my heart, I wasn't disappointed. A charming young lady up front waved a pretty little hand at me and said, "Dr. Asimov, do you believe in flying saucers?"

With a fixed smile on my face, I proceeded to give the answer I have carefully given after every lecture I have delivered. I said, "No, miss, I do not, and I think anyone who does is a crackpot."

And oh, the surprise on her face!

It is taken for granted by everyone outside the field, it seems to me, that because I write science fiction, I believe in flying saucers, in Atlantis, in psionics, in the prophecies of the Great Pyramid, in dianetics, in astrology, in Fort's theories and in the suggestion that Bacon wrote Shakespeare.

No one would ever think that someone who writes fantasies for pre-school children really thinks that rabbits can talk, or that a

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writer of hardboiled detective stories really thinks a man can down two quarts of whiskey in five minutes then make love to two girls in the next five minutes, or that a writer for the ladies' magazines really thinks that love conquers all and virtue always triumphs—but a science fiction writer *must* believe in flying saucers.

Now there's no use in asking *why*. I know why. A science fiction writer deals with border-line ideas of doubtful validity and so he must be particularly receptive to and sympathetic with such ideas.

And yet I am not.

Why not?

Why shouldn't I believe in flying saucers? I have written stories (very few) about them, in which I explained their existence very logically. I have also written stories (very few) in which psi played a part.

If I can buddy up to such notions long enough to write sober, logical stories about them, why do I reject them so definitely in real life?

I can put it another way. A good friend of mine once spent quite a long time trying to persuade me of the truth and validity of what I considered a piece of pseudo-science and bad pseudo-science at that. I sat there listening, quite stonily, and none of the cited evidence and instances and proofs had the slightest effect on me.

Finally the gentleman said to me, with considerable annoyance, "Damn it, Ike, the trouble with you is you have a built-in doubter."

To which the only answer I could see my way to making was a heart-felt, "Thank God."

If a scientist (and for purposes of this article, I shall think of myself—with the kind tolerance of the Gentle Reader—as a scientist) has one piece of temperamental equipment that is essential to his job, it is that of a built-in doubter. Before he does anything else, he must doubt. He must doubt what others tell him and what he reads in reference books, and, *most of all,* what his own experiments show him and what his own reasoning tells him.

Such doubt must, of course, exist in varying degrees. It is impossible, impractical and useless to be a maximal doubter at all times. One cannot (and would not want to) check personally every figure or observation given in a handbook or monograph before one uses it, and then proceed to check it and recheck it until one dies. *But,* if any trouble arises and nothing else seems wrong, one must be prepared to say to one's self, "Well, now, I wonder if the data I got out of the REAL GUARANTEED AUTHORITATIVE VERY SCIENTIFIC HANDBOOK might not be a misprint."

To doubt intelligently requires, therefore, a rough appraisal of the

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authoritativeness of a source. It also requires a rough estimate of the nature of the statement. If you were to tell me that you had a bottle containing one pound of pure titanium oxide, I would say, "Good," and ask to borrow some if I needed it. Nor would I test it, I would accept its purity on your say-so (until further notice, anyway).

If you were to tell me that you had a bottle containing one pound of pure thulium oxide, I would say with considerable astonishment, "You have? Where?" Then if I had use for the stuff, I would want to run some tests on it and even run it through an ion-exchange column before I could bring myself to use it.

And if you told me that you had a bottle containing one pound of pure americium oxide, I would say, "You're crazy," and walk away. I'm sorry, but my time is reasonably valuable, and I do not consider that statement to have enough chance of validity even to warrant my stepping into the next room to look at the bottle.

What I am trying to say is that doubting is far more important to the advance of science than believing is and that, moreover, doubting is a serious business that requires extensive training to be handled properly. People without training in a particular field do not know what to doubt and what not to doubt; or, to put it conversely, what to believe and what not to believe. I am very sorry to be undemocratic but one man's opinion is not necessarily as good as the next man's.

To be sure, I feel uneasy about seeming to kow-tow to authority in this fashion. After all, you all know of instances where authority was wrong, dead wrong. Look at Columbus, you will say. Look at Galileo.

I know about them, and about others, too. As a dabbler in the history of science, I can give you horrible examples you may never have heard of. I can cite the case of the German scientist Rudolf Virchow, who in the mid-nineteenth century was responsible for important advances in anthropology and practically founded the science of pathology. He was the first man to engage in cancer research on a scientific basis. However, he was dead-set against the germ theory of disease when that was advanced by Pasteur. So were many others, but one by one the opponents abandoned doubt as evidence multiplied. Not Virchow, however; rather than be forced to admit he was wrong and Pasteur right, Virchow quit science altogether and went into politics.

But this is a very exceptional case. Let's consider a far more normal and natural example of authority in the wrong.

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The example concerns a young Swedish chemical student, Svante August Arrhenius, who was working for his Ph.D. in the University of Uppsala in the 1880's. He was interested in the freezing points of solutions because certain odd points arose in that connection.

If sucrose (ordinary table sugar) is dissolved in water, the freezing point of the solution is somewhat lower than is that of pure water. Dissolve more sucrose and the freezing point lowers further. You can calculate how many molecules of sucrose must be dissolved per cubic centimeter of water in order to bring about a certain drop in freezing point. It turns out that this same number of molecules of glucose (grape sugar) and of many other soluble substances will bring about the same drop. It doesn't matter that a molecule of sucrose is twice as large as a molecule of glucose. What counts is the number of molecules and not their size.

But if sodium chloride (table salt) is dissolved in water, the freezing-point drop per molecule is twice as great as normal. And this goes for certain other substances, too. For instance, barium chloride, when dissolved, will bring about a freezing-point drop that is three times normal.

Arrhenius wondered if this meant that when sodium chloride was dissolved, each of its molecules broke into two portions, thus creating twice as many particles as there were molecules and therefore a doubled freezing-point drop. And barium chloride might break up into three particles per molecule. Since the sodium chloride molecule is composed of a sodium atom and a chlorine atom and since the barium chloride molecule is composed of a barium atom and two chlorine atoms, the logical next step was to suppose that these particular molecules broke up into individual atoms.

Then, too, there was another interesting fact. Those substances like sucrose and glucose which gave a normal freezing-point drop did not conduct an electric current in solution. Those, like sodium chloride and barium chloride, which showed abnormally high freezing-point drops, *did* do so.

Arrhenius wondered if the atoms, into which molecules broke up on solution, might not carry positive and negative electric charges. If the sodium atom carried a positive charge, for instance, it would be attracted to the negative electrode. If the chlorine atom carried a negative charge, it would be attracted to the positive electrode. Each would wander off in its own direction and the net result would be that such a solution would conduct an electric current. These charged and wandering atoms Arrhenius called

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"ions" from a Greek word meaning "wanderer."

Furthermore, a charged atom, or ion, would not have the properties of an uncharged atom. A charged chlorine atom would not be a gas that would bubble out of solution. A charged sodium atom would not react with water to form hydrogen. Once the ions made contact with the electrodes, however, they would lose their charge and become ordinary atoms. Chlorine would then bubble out of solution. Sodium would then react with water so that hydrogen would bubble out of solution. And, sure enough, when an electric current was sent through a salt solution, hydrogen and chlorine bubbles did indeed appear at the negative electrode and positive electrode respectively.

In 1884, Arrhenius, then 25, prepared his theories in the form of a thesis and presented it as part of his doctoral dissertation. The examining professors sat in frigid disapproval. No one had ever heard of electrically charged atoms and they turned on their built-in doubters.

However, Arrhenius argued his case so brilliantly and, on the single assumption of the dissolution of molecules into ions, managed to explain so much so neatly, that the professors' built-in doubters did not quite reach the intensity required to flunk the youngster. Instead they passed him—but with the lowest possible passing grade.

But, then, ten years later, the negatively-charged electron was discovered and the atom was found to be not the indivisible thing it had been considered but a complex assemblage of still smaller particles. Suddenly, the notion of ions made sense. If an atom lost an electron or two, it was left with a positive charge; if it gained them, it had a negative charge.

In the decade following, the Nobel Prizes were set up and in 1903, the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded to Arrhenius for that same thesis which, 19 years earlier, had barely squeaked him through for a Ph.D.

Were the professors wrong? Looking back, we can see they were. But in 1884, they were *not* wrong. They did exactly the right thing and they served science well. Every professor must listen to and appraise dozens of new ideas every year. He must greet each with the gradation of doubt his experience and training tells him the idea is worth.

Arrhenius's notion met with just the proper gradation of doubt. It was radical enough to be held at arms-length. However, it seemed to have just enough possible merit to be worth some recognition. The professors *did* give him his Ph.D. after all. And other scientists of the time paid atten-

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tion to it and thought about it. A very great one, Ostwald, thought enough of it to offer Arrhenius a good job.

Then, when the appropriate evidence turned up, doubt receded to minimal values and Arrhenius was greatly honored.

What better could you expect? Ought the professors to have fallen all over Arrhenius and his new theory on the spot? And if so, why shouldn't they also have fallen all over forty-nine other new theories presented that year, no one of which might have seemed much more unlikely than Arrhenius's, and some of which may even have appeared less unlikely?

It would have taken *longer* for the ionic theory to have become established if over-credulity on the part of scientists had led them into fifty blind-alleys. How many scientists would have been left to investigate Arrhenius's notions?

Scientific manpower is too limited to investigate everything that occurs to everybody, and always will be too limited. The advance of science depends on scientists in general being kept firmly in the direction of maximum possible return. And the only device that will keep them turned in that direction is doubt; doubt arising from a good, healthy and active built-in doubter.

But, you might say, this misses the point. Can't one pick and choose and isolate the brilliant from the imbecilic, accepting the first at once and wholeheartedly, and rejecting the rest completely? Would not such a course have saved ten years on ions without losing time on other notions?

Sure, if it could be done, but it can't. The godlike power to tell the good from the bad, the useful from the useless, the true from the false, instantly and *in toto* belongs to gods and not to men.

Let me cite you Galileo as an example; Galileo, who was one of the greatest scientific geniuses of all time, who invented modern science in fact, and who certainly experienced persecution and authoritarian enmity.

Surely, Galileo, of all people, was smart enough to know a good idea when he saw it, and revolutionary enough not to be deterred by its being radical.

Well, let's see. In 1632, Galileo published the crowning work of his career, DIALOGUE ON THE TWO PRINCIPAL SYSTEMS OF THE WORLD, which was the very book that got him into real trouble before the Inquisition. It dealt, as the title indicates, with the two principal systems; that of Ptolemy, which had the earth at the center of the universe with the planets, sun and moon going about it in complicated systems of circles within circles; and that of Copernicus, which had the sun at the center and the planets, earth and

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moon going about *it* in complicated systems of circles within circles.

Galileo did not as much as mention a *third* system, that of Kepler, which had the sun at the center but abandoned all the circles-within-circles jazz. Instead, he had the various planets travelling about the sun in ellipses, with the sun at one focus of the ellipse. It was Kepler's system that was correct and, in fact, Kepler's system has not been changed in all the time that has elapsed since. Why, then, did Galileo ignore it completely?

Was it that Kepler had not yet devised it? No, indeed. Kepler's views on that matter were published in 1609, twenty-seven years before Galileo's book.

Was it that Galileo had happened not to hear of it? Nonsense. Galileo and Kepler were in steady correspondence and were friends. When Galileo built some spare telescopes, he sent one to Kepler. When Kepler had ideas, he wrote about them to Galileo.

The trouble was that Kepler was still bound up with the mystical notions of the Middle Ages. He cast horoscopes for famous men, for a fee, and worked seriously and hard on astrology. He also spent time working out the exact notes formed by the various planets in creating the "music of the spheres" and pointed out that Earth's notes were mi, fa, mi, standing for misery, famine and misery. He also devised a theory accounting for the relative distances of the planets from the sun by nesting the five regular solids one within another and making deductions therefrom.

Galileo, who must have heard of all this, and who had nothing of the mystic about himself, could only conclude that Kepler, though a nice guy and a bright fellow and a pleasant correspondent, was a complete nut. I am sure that Galileo heard all about the elliptical orbits, and, considering the source, shrugged it off.

Well, Kepler was indeed a nut, but he happened to be luminously right on occasion, too, and Galileo, of all people, couldn't pick the diamond out from among the pebbles.

Shall we sneer at Galileo for that?

Or should we rather be thankful that Galileo didn't interest himself in the ellipses *and* in astrology *and* in the nesting of regular solids *and* in the music of the spheres. Might not credulity have led him into wasting his talents, to the great loss of all succeeding generations?

No, no, until some supernatural force comes to our aid and tells men what is right and what wrong, men must blunder along as best they can, and only the built-in doubter of the trained

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scientist can offer a refuge of safety.

The very mechanism of scientific procedure, built up slowly over the years, is designed to encourage doubt and to place obstacles in the way of new ideas. No person receives credit for a new idea unless he publishes it for all the world to see and criticize. It is further considered advisable to announce ideas in papers read to colleagues at public gatherings that they might blast the speaker down face-to-face.

Even after announcement or publication, no observation can be accepted until it has been confirmed by an independent observer, and no theory is considered more than, at best, an interesting speculation until it is backed by experimental evidence that has been independently confirmed and that has withstood the rigid doubts of others in the field.

All this is nothing more than the setting up of a system of "natural selection" designed to winnow the fit from the unfit in the realm of ideas, in a manner analogous to the concept of Darwinian evolution. The process may be painful and tedious, as evolution itself is; but in the long run it gets results, as evolution itself does. What's more, I don't see that there can be any substitute.

Now let me make a second point. The intensity to which the built-in doubter is activated, is also governed by the extent to which a new observation fits into the organized structure of science. If it fits well, doubt can be small; if it fits poorly, doubt can be intensive; if it threatens to overturn the structure completely, doubt is, and should be, nearly insuperable.

The reason for this is that now, three hundred and fifty years after Galileo founded experimental science, the structure that has been reared, bit by bit, by a dozen generations of scientists is so firm that the likelihood of its being completely wrong has reached the vanishing point.

Nor need you point to relativity as an example of a revolution that overturned science. Einstein did not overturn the structure, he merely extended, elaborated and improved it. Einstein did not prove Newton wrong, but merely incomplete. Einstein's world system contains Newton's as a special case and one which works if the volume of space considered is not too large and if velocities involved are not too great.

In fact, I should say that since Kepler's time in astronomy, since Galileo's time in physics, and since Lavoisier's time in chemistry, no discovery or theory, however revolutionary it has seemed, has actually overturned the structure of science or any major branch of it. The structure has

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merely been improved and refined.

The effect is similar to the paving of a road, and its broadening, and the addition of cloverleaf intersections, and the installation of radar to combat speeding. None of this, please notice, is the equivalent of abandoning the road and building another in a completely new direction.

But let's consider a few concrete examples drawn from contemporary life. A team of Columbia University geologists have been exploring the configuration of the ocean bottom for years. Now they find that the mid-Atlantic ridge (a chain of mountains running down the length of the Atlantic) has a rift in the center, a deep chasm or crack. What's more, this rift circles around Africa, sends an off-shoot up into the Indian Ocean and across eastern Africa, and heads up the Pacific, skimming the California coast as it does so. It is like a big crack encircling the earth.

The observation itself can be accepted. Those involved were trained and experienced specialists and confirmation is ample.

But why the rift? In the past couple of weeks, one of the geologists, Bruce Heezen, suggests that the crack may be due to the expansion of the earth.

This is certainly one possibility. If the interior were slowly expanding, the thin crust would give and crack, like an eggshell.

But why should earth's interior expand? To do so it would have to take up a looser arrangement, become less dense; the atoms would have to spread out a bit.

Heezen suggests that one way in which all this might happen is if the gravitational force of the earth were very slowly weakening with time. The central pressures would therefore ease up and the compressed atoms of the interior would slowly spread out.

But why should the earth's gravity decrease, unless the force of gravitation everywhere were slowly decreasing with time? Now this deserves a lot of doubt, because there is nothing in the structure of science to suggest that the force of gravitation decreases with time. However, it doesn't deserve insuperable doubt because, in addition to the fact that the man advancing the theory is a respected scientist, there is nothing in the structure of science to suggest that the force of gravitation does *not* decrease with time.

What is needed is experimental evidence one way or the other, or, failing that, at least an extension of the theory to cover other phenomena (currently puzzling) as well. If the theory is wrong, it will not survive the doubting it will get.

Or take another case. As this article was being written, I received a news clipping from a

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Gentle Reader to the effect that an eighth-grader in South Carolina had grown four sets of beans under glass jars. One set remained there always, subjected to silence. The other three had their jars removed one hour a day in order that they might be exposed to noise; in one case to jazz, in another to serious music and in a third to the raucous noises of sports-car engines. The only set of plants that grew vigorously were those exposed to the engine noises.

The headline was: *Beans can hear—and they prefer auto racing noise to music.*

Automatically, my built-in doubter moves into high gear. In the first place, is the newspaper story a hoax? It could well be. Read HOAXES by Curtis D. MacDougall (Dover Publications) and you will be all but convinced that nothing in any newspaper can possibly be believed.

Then even if I can bring myself to take the newspaper item at face value, I must ask myself: Did the kid know what he was doing? Was he experienced enough to make the nature of the noise the only variable? Was there a difference in the soil or in the water supply or in some small matter, disregarded through inexperience.

Finally, even if I accept the validity of the experiment, what does it really prove? To the headline writer and undoubtedly to almost everybody who reads the article, it will prove that plants can hear, and that they have preferences and will refuse to grow if they feel lonely and neglected.

This is so far against the current structure of science that my built-in doubter clicks it right off and stamps it: IGNORE. Now what is an alternative explanation that fits in reasonably well with the structure of science? Sound is not just something to hear; it is a form of vibration. Can it be that sound vibrations stir up tiny soil particles making it easier for plants to absorb water, or putting more ions within reach by improving diffusion? May the natural noise that surrounds plants act in this fashion to promote growth? And may the engine noises have worked best on a one-hour-per-day basis because they were the loudest and produced the most vibration?

Any scientist (or eighth-grader) who feels called on to experiment further, ought to try vibrations that do not produce audible sound; ultrasonic vibrations, mechanical vibrations and so on. Or he might also try to expose the plant itself to vibrations of all sorts while leaving the soil insulated, and vice versa.

Which finally brings me to flying saucers, psionics and the like. The questions I ask myself are:

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What is the nature of the authorities promulgating these and other viewpoints of this sort?

How well do such observations and theories fit in with the established structure of science?

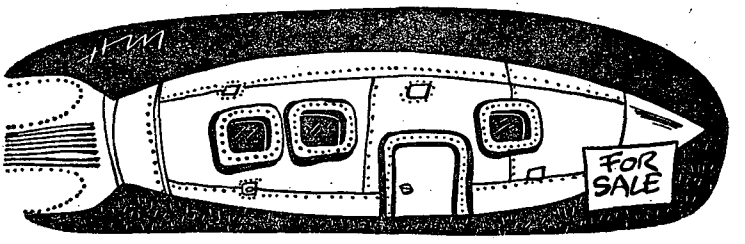
My answers are, respectively, Very poor, and Very poorly.

If you want some interesting details in the matter, I refer you to Martin Gardner's excellent book FACTS AND FALLACIES IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE which Ballantine has just brought out.

Which leaves me completely unrepentant as far as my double role in life is concerned. If I get a good idea involving flying saucers and am in the mood to write some science fiction, I will gladly and with delight write a flying-saucer story.

And I will continue to disbelieve in them firmly in real life.

And if that be schizophrenia, make the most of it.



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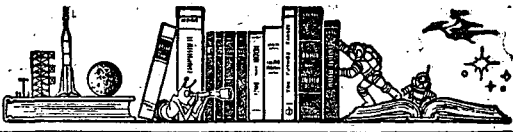

THE INTELLIGENT MAN'S GUIDE TO SCIENCE, *Isaac Asimov*, *Basic Books, Inc., $15.00*

MR. ASIMOV'S SPLENDID POPULAR two-volume guide to science is a comprehensive survey of the physical and biological disciplines as of A.D. 1960. It is written with just the right balance of sober fact and breezy style that makes the author one of our most engaging popular science writers.

Volume One (The Physical Sciences) begins with The Universe, and, after a discussion of its size, birth and death, works down to our own earth, its physical makeup in gross, and ultimately to its atomic structure, with reference to the latest advances in the nuclear sciences.

Volume Two (The Biological Sciences) reverses the order. That is, it begins with the molecular structure of organic matter, and then works up through proteins, the cell and micro-organisms, to the body, and ultimately to our own species, and how and why we function as thinking animals.

The volumes are well diagramed and illustrated, with the beautifully reproduced plates conveniently gathered in groups rather than scattered throughout the books. Although Mr. Asimov's forte is the essay, he is experienced enough in fiction to recognize the appeal of human interest, and never fails to introduce anecdotes wherever possible.

His many admirers (of whom we are one) who have delighted in his articles in this magazine, will welcome the opportunity to enjoy him in bulk. For 850 packed pages he made this department wish that he had been our science teacher in school. He makes science so comprehensible and fascinating that we put the volumes down, convinced that at last we knew all there was to know, and that, but for the lack of the genial Mr. Asimov as our professor, we might have turned out to be another Nobel Prize winner. And so will you.

THE INTELLIGENT MAN'S GUIDE also raises another point which should interest science fiction fans: the conflict between technical and popular science writing. The problem should be of interest because science fiction is

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a form of popular science for the layman.

Scientists feel very keenly about popular science, and blood comes into their eyes when they discuss it. As a rule they dislike it intensely; there are very few popular science books which meet with their approval. At the American Museum of Natural History, which is presently re-printing popular science books, all books must be approved by all curators, and they pass very few. They believe that most popular science is guilty of over-simplification, and sacrifices truth for the sake of readability.

On the other hand, they admit that their own technical texts make impossible reading for the average man, and are, in fact, extremely difficult going for other scientists who are unfamiliar with their own particular field. Yet scientists have a deep desire to communicate with each other and with the public.

Most of them agree that this is a semantic problem. Since the goal of the scientist is truth, all statements must adhere strictly to the known truth, and carefully specify what is known, assumed, theorized, and/or insufficiently validated. This places an intolerable burden on the scientist as an author. He must use a technical vocabulary which is often unfamilar to other scientists, and most constantly qualify his statements, which makes exasperating reading for laymen.

Mr. Asimov's two volumes will probably not meet with the approval of scientists. "Oh, it's all right . . . for popular science," they will sneer, and thus miss the entire point. Science must be popularized, unless it is to become a Mystery. And scientists must make an effort to speak the language of the masses, unless they are to become Druids. Mr. Asimov is fluent in both tongues. As a scientist he has done some elegant needle-work in biochemistry; but as a popular writer he does not count the stitches of science; he presents the whole fabric, which is precisely what the layman needs.

This department is presently taking a course in graduate physiology. Our seminar is devoting an entire year to the study of subjects to which Mr. Asimov allocates just a few pages. Our colleagues, we are sure, would dismiss Mr. Asimov's treatment as "superficial," but they're wrong. Like dedicated scientists they place themselves in the position of the intolerable bore who irritatingly interrupts his narration of an anecdote to get names, dates, and places precisely correct.

We remember discussing a performance of a Mahler symphony with the maestro who had conducted it. We confessed that

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we had found the fifty minute playing unendurably long. "Ah yes," he replied, "but you must remember that it was written seventy-five years ago when people had more time for everything. A man could cross the street at leisure, without bothering to watch out for traffic. There would be, perhaps, one horse and carriage coming toward him very slowly. Today a man must rush across a street. He must rush in everything. Today no symphony can be longer than twenty minutes. Times have changed."

Times have indeed changed, but most scientists refuse to recognize this. They still think of the layman as the XIXth century gentleman of leisure with nothing better to do than pore over the Transactions of the Royal Society. The public has never been more interested in science, or shown a greater desire to know more about it; but they quite rightly refuse to waste time on the fifty-minute performance. They want the twenty-minute gist.

Popular science does this for fact; science fiction does this for theory. It is the popularizer of ideas. How many fans would have been aware of the intriguing aspects of Relativity, Entropy, Semantics, Cybernetics, Non-Euclidian Geometry, &etc., if they had been forced to grind through the technical papers that first expounded them . . . if adroit science fiction authors had not taken these ideas in hand and translated them into entertaining forms which the layman could understand and enjoy?

Most scientists are atrocious writers, which, we believe, is why they turn their backs on the problem and take refuge in their technical jargon. The few scientists who are men of letters as well, almost invariably turn out delightful stories and articles; and Mr. Asimov is among the first of this rare breed.

We heartily recommend THE INTELLIGENT MAN'S GUIDE TO SCIENCE for every book shelf. It will be a delightful university education for those of you who never went to college; it will be what your education should have been if you did go to college; it will remain your standard reference and constant companion until it is out-dated, by which time, D.V., Mr. Asimov will have written another.

—Alfred Bester

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Cosmic Sex and You

Sammial Longhorn Priapus, Sx.D.

(Ed. Note: Dr. Priapus will answer your questions on sex in the cosmos. Just address your questions to Dr. S. L. Priapus, Saturnian Sex Syndicated, Marsport, Los Angeles, Solar System.)

Q. Dear Dr. Priapus:

If a functional robot named Rex
Met an android of feminine sex,
With oil would he sluice her
And try to seduce her,
Or would her unfunctional shape just perplex?

Just A Gigolo

A. Dear Just A:

In asking this question, dear reader, you are committing a common error, that of attributing to inanimate objects powers and desires belonging only to animate beings. No matter how superior your robot appears to be in looks and in intelligence to you, he, she or it (depending on your point of view) is still a machine, and cannot partake of that greatest ability of life, that is, to be hurt. In literary criticism, this error is known as the "pathetic phallacy."

Q. Dear Dr. Priapus:

I've heard that the people of Flaring
Have sexual relations by staring.
Though the glance may be cursory
The result is a nursery
Pray tell, is there fun in this pairing?

Old Fashioned

A. Dear Old Fashioned:

What you are referring to is the galaxy's only known case of

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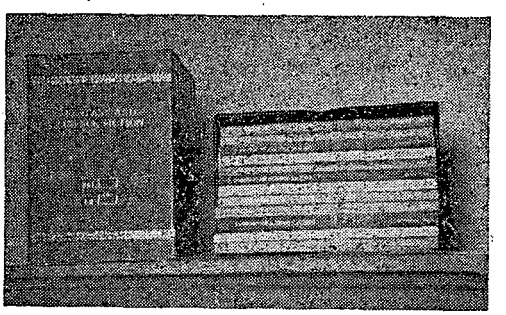
extra-sensory conception. I am told that there is more to this than just a sneak peak. (As a matter of fact, the only crime punishable by death on Flaring is that of being a peeping Tom.) The fun of the courtship comes from the almost infinite number of ways that two young people might look at each other. All of the Flare folk (at least those of reproducing age) are required to wear son glasses, and there is much that goes on between the couple's first sight of each other through a glass darkly, and the final glint in the eye. Much envied by his fellows is the man whose glance might be described as piercing. Since the eyes of the male child always are the color of the eyes of the father, The Flarers have this saying: "When mister's eyes are nothing like the son, someone has caught a cuckold."

—NILS PETERSON



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Richard Banks is an old pro writer, he says, who used to free-lance fiction in the 30's, went to Yale as a publicity man in 1951, and is now associate director of the Yale University News Bureau. His last published work was THE MYSTERIOUS LEAF, *(Harcourt, Brace) a children's book which came out six years ago. The delightful freshness of the following leads us to urge him to return to his typewriter directly. . . .*

DADDY'S PEOPLE

by Richard Banks

FERGIE FOUND OUT VERY EARLY in life that there were three magic words which could keep sleep-time from arriving, sometimes for as long as an hour. The three words actually formed a question, so:

"What people, Daddy?"

Now, to understand how these three little words could hold up sleep-time so long, it is necessary to know something about Fergie's daddy, to whom the mysterious words had to be said.

First of all, Fergie's daddy loved to talk, oh, how he loved to talk. Even to loaves of bread he talked, and to his razor, his hair-brush, his pencils. And his voice made make-believe poetry out of his gossip, and his eyes twinkled merrily after exciting things like little blue puppy-dogs.

He never could say, Good morning, Fergie, because his make-believe forced it to come out, I give you the greatest good morning, Fergie, from the wonderful people of here and now, and there and the past. Words were his meat, his milk, and words were like notes of music in his mouth.

I like an ant and I like a cloud, but I like them best out loud—this was what Fergie's daddy said. Or, I like lions and I like birds, but especially I like them in words. So said Fergie's father.

Most of all it was people Fergie's father loved, and him saying often and again, Oh, the people I've known, the people like flowers in a garden I've known.

This was Fergie's chance.

"What people, Daddy?" he'd say, wriggling deeper under the bed-covers. Because when daddy read from a book, sleep-time came right on the dot, and lights out and a cheery goodnight. But when

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daddy talked about his people the clock came to a stop. And the bed with its shady light on the headboard became an arena where daddy's people came and went, his funny, exciting, wonderful people.

But daddy was something of a problem, too. His words got in the way of everything, particularly the stories he told.

Settled down together on the bed and a story about to be started because of Fergie's three magic words, his father always had to blow words at the ceiling. Like:

The world is a dandelion and a weed, tied with a bit of twine, said daddy, but a man is a rose and a chrysanthemum, tied with a big red bow.

Daddy's eyes found a high wind in his words and his face lit up as it always did when he fancied up his gossip into make-believe poetry.

"Go on, Daddy," Fergie said, wriggling deeper, but his eyes sharp with it all. The game was to get daddy started on his people, and you had to humor him by letting him play with his words a while.

What people, indeed, said Fergie's father, lying down at last beside Fergie with a happy sigh. And the hands of the clock skittered, and the ticks of the clock skipped a beat or two.

Yesterday, he said—now, I've got to be quick about this, it's bedtime and all—but yesterday it was like finding a bit of pink silk in a dust-bin, I saw a man with movies in his forehead, like a television between his eyebrows and his hair. And I asked the mayor and I asked the postmaster and I ascertained—which is only a bushy way of saying I found out—that the name of this man was Johnny Johnjohn. Or was it Sammy Samsam? Or could it have been Billy Twowilliam?

"I like Johnny Johnjohn," said Fergie. "I could call you Daddy Daddad, couldn't I?"

I wanted to help this man, said Fergie's father with his puppy-dog eyes shining. I wanted to help Johnny Johnjohn because I knew he loved people like I do. I could see it at a glance. I knew he had a gush of words like a volcano for every face he saw.

But the mayor and the postmaster—and I believe the fire chief had something to say about it, too—told me Johnny Johnjohn was a sad case because he had such trouble with people. People saw right through him, they said, but I knew this wasn't true. Johnny Johnjohn wanted to talk to people and he would begin talking to them, big nice important things he had to say. But they couldn't pay attention because the movies in his forehead snatched their attention. And talk—well, it faded off every time at about the speed of a snowflake in a hot fry-

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ing pan. Which, said Fergie's daddy, is not too slow.

"Is it real fast, Daddy?" said Fergie feeling very happy-serious because the clock was almost at a complete standstill now.

If you get right down to it, said Fergie's daddy with a big grin, you'd have to admit it is practically terrific how fast a snowflake melts in a frying pan.

"But Johnny Johnjohn," said Fergie. The game was not to let daddy slow down.

Yes, I wanted to help him, he said, and I did, too. I wrapped my handkerchief around his forehead and in five minutes Johnny Johnjohn had talked to two men, a school teacher and a gun-maker. Or was he a cab driver? And he was so happy they had listened to him, he went home and slept for two whole days and all his forehead movies turned into love stories.

"But you said you saw him yesterday," said Fergie.

Yesterday, was it? said Fergie's daddy raising a shoulder like a flag on a battlefield. It couldn't have been yesterday then, because he slept for two days and I know this to be a fact. Oh, the people I've known like books in a great library, the salty, sugary, peppery, cinnamony people.

"Tell me more about Johnny Johnjohn," urged Fergie.

Johnny Johnjohn? said his daddy. Oh. Oh, him! He sat up suddenly on the side of the bed and his eyes crackled in a happy clock-stopping way. Wish I could tell you a great deal more about him right now, he said breathlessly. But you see, I forgot to tell you about Mr. Door and him a man the mayor and the postmaster, not to mention the fire chief, just wouldn't believe.

"But I do," said Fergie. "I do already, Daddy."

Of course you do, said Fergie's daddy. The mayor and the postmaster, they're just butterfly people. Maybe it's their jobs not to believe in people. But you've got to believe in people. You've got to love them and believe in them.

I bumped smack as a jack into this Mr. Door as I was darting into the bank for a bit of change. And he had a little door-knob in his coat lapel where men usually wear Kiwanis buttons or little flowers or such. And my eyes told me right off here was a man I had to know. And so I said, easy as please, could I twist the door-knob, sir, and do you know, he said by all means I could. For Fergie. Do you know that?

"He must know me," said Fergie.

Well, he's probably heard of you at least, said Fergie's daddy proudly. I was just reaching up to twist his door-knob when he stopped my hand. You've got to decide where you want to go through to, said Mr. Door. And I

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said I've got millions of places I'd like to go through to. But I had to pick just one, he said. And it took me almost a full minute to decide, with all the time Mr. Door smiling at me in the sunlight and saying I'm glad we have a few people left who believe in people.

"I can't wait," said Fergie. "Where did you go through to?"

Now you've got to remember, said Fergie's daddy, letting his words get in the way of the story again, when a man has a chance to go anywhere at all at all, where does he pick but a little, second-rate place or an odd little place. He can't seem to settle on the peak of the highest mountain in the world, or the lair of a jungle tiger, or the bridge of a large ship off to far parts.

"I said I can't wait," said Fergie. "Come on, Daddy."

Fergie's daddy had his eyebrows up, which was the happiest sign you could find about him at bed-time. All right, he said, I won't drag this out another minute. I said to this Mr. Door, I have a place in mind, sir, and shall I turn your door-knob now? Yes, now, he said, and you are such a fine man, sir, he said to me, 'I'll wait till you come back which I usually don't do since I am a busy man.

So I twisted the door-knob, said Fergie's father, and pulled like you would on any door and it was natural as rain, Mr. Door opened up and there was the place I'd picked, a little scary but I straightened my shoulders and stepped through to it.

"Where?" said Fergie, holding his breath a little.

Did you ever see the inside of a moment? said Fergie's father. This was the place I'd picked, the inside of a moment. It was something of a squeeze, if you ask me, and noisy as all get-out and hard to breathe in because of the terrible wind. But it was beautiful to look at, like rainbows running and playing and melting into each other and there was a music you wouldn't believe, so rich and lilting. And I wanted to spend an hour there just looking and listening and feeling the inside of a moment. But I knew I couldn't because no man ever has, so I turned around and stepped out again.

"You should have stayed," said Fergie. "I would have."

You don't need to stay, said Fergie's daddy. Once you've been inside a moment it leaves a very happy mark on you.

"What about Mr. Door?" Fergie asked.

Mr. Door? said Fergie's father. Oh. Oh, him! . . . Well, I shook his hand and he gave me his card in case he can ever be of service to me, that's his business, you know. And I went on into the bank and got my change. And people told me there had been thunder at the

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door which made me smile at how loud the inside of my moment had been.

And then, said Fergie's daddy, I went out into the world again and started hunting for more people because there's an old saying that once you run into two wonderful people on a single day you're bound to run into a third. It's like wonderful words. Once you get the hang of a few, more spring up like daisies in a sandpile.

"Words are just to say things with," said Fergie, smiling at the way the clock had been suffocated with daddy's words.

But his father shook his head strongly.

Words are to eat like an angel food cake (he said)
Words are to swim in like a summery lake
Words are to drive like an automobile
And words are to build like a girder of steel.

But most of all, said Fergie's daddy very pleased with the high wind of his words, they are like colors. You don't want to talk all black or all white. You want to talk like a sunset where the tips of the mountains put commas in your sentences. Or like a rainbow where the pot of gold is like the breath you take at the end of a juicy conversation.

"But what about that man?"

What man?

"That man you were going to meet after you left Mr. Door," said Fergie, feeling that the clock was going to get restless if daddy didn't continue talking.

Oh, him, said Fergie's daddy and the clock went back to sleep. You've got to remember that the most frequent good things in the world are people, he said. And I had no sooner started across the Green than I saw this man coming toward me.

"Jimmy Jimjim?" Fergie laughed. "Or Benny Benben?"

Shows how little you know about people, said Fergie's daddy grinning a wide, wide grin. This man, my eyes told me, was a wonderful piece of people and I knew I had to stop him. He was rushing down toward me like a marble on a sliding board. Which, he said, is not too slow. And I stepped right into his path and held up my hand and said I'll tell you my name if you'll tell me yours. And it turned out he was a Mr. Street and he was happy, he said, that he finally had met a man with a name like mine. Especially, he said, since I happened to have a son named Fergie.

"He liked my name?"

He liked it so much he drew a square in the dirt of the Green with the toe of his shoe and named it Fergie's Land. This is a fact I think the mayor and the postmaster will back up.

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"Mr. Street isn't much of a name, however," said Fergie.

Sh-h-h-h, said Fergie's daddy, twisting his head to look into the far corner of the bedroom. Mr. Street is a wonderful name because it was his name and he was a wonderful man. And I said to Mr. Street, you've got to give me a second of your time, sir, because I see you have a stoplight in your coat lapel and I was just talking to a man with a door-knob there.

That must have been Mr. Door himself, said Mr. Street, and I said of course it was, so Mr. Street gave me a second of his time, but he said if I had to go anywhere across him it would have to be in a hurry. And he said I'd have to have a definite place to go to in this hurry.

"Where did you pick?" Fergie asked.

It's like everything you do, said his daddy, it's hard to decide and you in a hurry. But I finally decided and I told Mr. Street I had decided and do you know, the stoplight in his lapel flashed green and he said, step across me quickly and you'll be there. Which I did, of course, and I was.

"But where?" Fergie said. "Come *on*, Daddy!"

I've always been in a hurry to make a million dollars, said Fergie's daddy, so there I was. I mean there I was at the place I'll be some day when I've made my million dollars. But the funny thing was, I arrived there in such a rush I couldn't stop. The million was neat and fancy like a silk dress folded up on a shelf and I reached for it as I swept by. But I was through to the other side of Mr. Street before I could grab it.

"We could have bought a lot of things," said Fergie wistfully.

It doesn't matter, said his daddy happily. I know it's there, now, my million dollars, so I don't have to be in such a hurry any more, do I?

"And Mr. Street," said Fergie. "What happened to him?"

Mr. Street, cried his father. Oh. Oh, him! . . . . He rushed off, waving his hand at me in a very friendly fashion. Fergie's father began closing his eyes contentedly, his voice slipping dangerously toward a mumble as he said, Oh, the people I've known, the people like apples and peaches and cherries I've known.

Fergie felt the clock stir and he knew that if he didn't take swift action sleep-time was upon him.

"Where do you find such wonderful people, Daddy?" he said in a rush. "I go down the street and I don't see people like that."

Daddy's eyes popped open and he raised himself to an elbow. You've got to look for people and you've got to love people to see them, he said. But even then, there are a great many people it's hard to see. Even I find it hard to see them.

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You meet a Johnny Johnjohn or a Mr. Door or a Mr. Street and you know them instantly and you love them, his daddy went on. And you meet Mr. House or Mr. Bugle or Mr. Carr—I've met them all—and they are like bright marbles to put into your memory bag.

"What about the ones it's hard to see?" Fergie said.

Funny thing you'd mention it, Fergie's daddy replied. It brings me to what happened on my way home this evening and me full as a football with the people I'd met already today.

Fergie chuckled. "How can a football be full?" he said. "There's nothing but air in it."

Everything is full of something, even if it's only air, said Fergie's daddy. A bird is full of flying, only you can't see the flying unless he does it. And people—they're full of people, that's the way it has to be. People now and people in history, people today and last year and a thousand years ago. Full of people, all of us. If we were full of anything else we wouldn't be people.

"You were on your way home this evening," Fergie said.

On my way home? Fergie's father said puzzled. Oh. Oh, yes, and I saw a deep inviting knothole in a tree by the sidewalk and I said to myself I've got to have a look through that knothole, that's for sure. So I did, and you'd never believe it. That you wouldn't.

"I do," said Fergie. "I do already, Daddy."

I put my eye to shooshing into that knothole, said his daddy, and the first thing I saw was this big brown eye looking right back at me. It scared me at first something awful, but it was such a friendly brown and it had a twinkle to it as though there were lips in a smile beneath it. So I knew right then I had to try to know that brown eye and I said, if you'll step out from behind the tree, sir, I'll introduce myself properly and maybe you'd like to come home to dinner.

"But it was just an eye, wasn't it, Daddy?" Fergie said with a yawny giggle.

No, not just an eye, said Fergie's daddy. I looked behind the tree and no one was there and I put my eye to the knothole again and there was the big brown eye still there like a chocolate cake at the end of a telescope. So I said I don't know what world you're in but move around a little so I can see more of you—like this, I said, and I moved first an ear, then my hair and lips and cheek in front of the knothole.

When I got my eye back to it, my new friend was doing the same. I saw his hair and his ear and his chin but it wasn't enough, especially since I could hear a great roomful of his friends holding a party and talking excitedly behind him. I wanted to know his

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name and he said it was Mr. Partly-Partly, and I wanted to know what the party was about and he said it was to celebrate ten thousand blue eggs.

But at that moment he said goodby, he had to go back to the party and I never did get to ask him what there is to celebrate about ten thousand blue eggs.

"It might have been Easter in that world," said Fergie with another yawn.

His daddy lay down again and his eyelids caught a case of cotton from the bale that was beginning to press so firmly into Fergie's own eyes. The point is, said Fergie's daddy, I suppose I got to know Mr. Partly-Partly tolerably well through that knothole but I never did see much of him—or at least, much of him all at one time.

Fergie heard the clock ticking sleep-time loud as loud. "Daddy —" he said, but suddenly holding off the clock didn't seem to matter.

Oh, the people I've known, Fergie's father was saying softly, the melted-butter, cake-batter, lemon-pie people.

The tick-tock, round-the-block people that daddy knew, thought Fergie.

Daddy's people. . . .

On Hearing Another Report of Little Green Men From . . .

If we have visitors, I think
That they record the snowflakes' clink
When stars of pointed ice collide.
They catch the whoosh of meteor-slide.
With joyousness of sprite or child
They hear the fern sway in the wild,
Receiving earth sounds in some brain
Too delicate for earth's terrain.
The micro-thuds when petals fall,
The cat's tail flicked against the wall—
I think that they collect them all
To be examined in the Swan;
Or, if they make a different choice,
My heartbeats singing like a voice
Will circle far Aldebaran.

—Doris Pitkin Buck

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In our February issue we brought you "Hothouse," by Brian W. Aldiss. It was, we think, a wonderfully fresh and original science fantasy of a time in the far future when vegetable life has become dominant, and the few remaining human beings are one-fifth of their former size. The present novelet is a sequel, and there are more to come!

NOMANSLAND

by Brian W. Aldiss

THE STRANGE THING WAS THE silence.

The silence seemed to carry as much weight as that deep mass of foliage which covered all the land on the day side of the planet. It was a silence built of millions upon millions of years, intensifying as the sun overhead poured forth more and more energy in the first stages of its decline. Not that the silence signified lack of life. Life was everywhere, life on a formidable scale. But the increased solar radiation that had brought the extinction of most of the animal kingdom had spelt the triumph of plant life. Everywhere, in a thousand forms and guises, the plants ruled. And vegetables have no voices.

A group of nine humans moved along the numberless branches of the forest; they disturbed that deep silence not at all. They travelled high up in the Tips, patterns of light and shade falling across their green skins. Continually alert for danger, they sped along with all possible discretion. Fear drove them with apparent purpose, although in fact they had no destination. Travel gave them a needful illusion of safety, so they travelled.

A white tongue made them halt.

The tongue lowered itself gradually down to one side of them, keeping close to a sheltering trunk. Noiselessly it sank, pointing down from the Tips whence it had come towards the distant Ground, a fibrous cylindrical thing like a snake, tough and naked. The group watched it go, watched its tip sink out of sight through the foliage towards the dark floor of the forest, watched its length paying out.

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"A suckerbird!" Toy said to the others. She was ten years old, ten times she had been alive to see the figs form on the banyans. She lead the group since the adults had Gone Up, and her leadership was still unsure. Most of the other children—all of them but Gren—clustered round her and looked anxiously from her to the moving tongue.

"Will it harm?" Fay asked. She was five, and the youngest by a year.

"We will kill it," Veggy said. He was a man child. He jumped up and down on the branch so that his soul rattled.

"I will kill it," Toy said, firmly asserting her leadership. She stepped forward, unwinding a fibre rope from her waist as she did so.

The others watched in alarm, not yet trusting to Toy's skill. Most of them were already young adults, with the broad shoulders, strong arms, and long fingers of their kind. Three of them—a generous proportion—were men children: the clever Gren, the self-assertive Veggy, the quiet Poas. Gren was the oldest of the three. He stepped forward now.

"I also know how to trap the suckerbird," he told Toy, eyeing the long white tube that still lowered itself into the depths. "I will hold you to keep you safe, Toy. You need help."

Toy turned to him. She smiled because he was beautiful and because one day he would mate with her. Then she frowned because she was leader.

"Gren, you are man now. It is tabu to touch you, except during the courtship seasons. I will trap the bird. We will all go up to the Tips to kill and eat it. It shall be a great feast for us."

Gren's and Toy's gaze met challengingly. But just as she had not yet settled into her role as leader, so he had hardly assumed—and was indeed reluctant to assume—the role of rebel. He disagreed with her ideas, but tried as yet not to show it. He fell back, fingering the soul that dangled from his belt, a little wooden image of himself.

"Do as you please," he said—but Toy had already turned away.

On the topmost branches of the forest perched the suckerbird. Being of vegetable origin, it had little intelligence and only a rudimentary nervous system. What it lacked in this respect, it made up for in bulk and longevity.

Shaped like a mighty two-winged spore, the suckerbird could never fold its wings. They were capable of little movement, although the sensitive flexible fibres with which they were covered, and their overall span of some two hundred metres, made them masters of the breezes that stirred their hothouse world.

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So the suckerbird perched, paying out that incredible tongue from its pouch down to the nourishment it needed in the obscure depths of the forest. At last it hit Ground.

Cautiously, slowly, the sensitive tip of the tongue explored, ready to shrink from any of the many dangers of that gloomy region. Deftly, it avoided giant mildews and funguses. It found a patch of naked earth, soggy and heavy and full of nourishment. It bored down. It began to suck.

"Right!" Toy said when she was ready. She felt the excitement of the others behind her.

Her rope was knotted to her knife. Now she leant forward and slipped the loose end about the white hose, knotting it in a slip knot. She sank her blade into the tree, thus securing the arrangement. After a moment, the tongue bulged and expanded up its length as soil was sucked up inside it to the suckerbird's 'stomach.' The noose tightened. Though the suckerbird did not realize it, it was now a prisoner, and could not fly from its perch.

"That's well done!" Poyly said admiringly. She was Toy's closest friend, emulating her in everything.

"Quick, to the Tips!" Toy called.

They all began climbing the nearest trunk, to get to the suckerbird—all except Gren. Though not disobedient by nature, he knew there were easier ways than climbing to get to the Tips. As he had learnt to do from some of his elders in the old group, from Lily-yo and Haris the man, he whistled from the corner of his lips.

"Come on, Gren!" Poas called back to him. When Gren shook his head, Poas shrugged and climbed up the tree after the others.

A dumbler came floating to Gren's command, twirling laconically down through the foliage. Its vanes spun, and on the end of each spoke of its flight umbrella grew a curiously shaped seed. Through each seed every nuance of the forest air could breathe, guiding it to a location suitable for propagation. The dumblers were fruits of the giant whistle-thistle. Many of them were doomed to roam for a thousand years through the arcades of the forest before coming on a likely place to seed themselves.

Gren climbed onto his dumbler, clinging tightly to its shaft, and whistled his instructions. Slowly the dumbler carried him upwards, so that he arrived in the Tips at the same time as the rest of the group, unruffled when they were panting.

"You should not have done that," Toy told him angrily. "You were in danger."

"Nothing ate me," Gren re-

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plied. Yet suddenly he felt a chill, for he knew Toy was right. Climbing a tree was laborious but safe. Floating among the leaves, where hideous creatures might momentarily appear and drag one down into the green depths, was both easy and wildly dangerous. Still, he was safe now. He would let them see his cleverness soon enough.

The cylindrical white tongue of the suckerbird still pulsed nearby. The bird itself squatted just above them, keeping its immense crude eyes swivelled for enemies. It was headless. Slung between the great stiffly extended wings was a heavy bag of body, peppered with the corneal protuberances of its eyes and its bud corms; among these latter hung the pouch from which the tongue now extended. By deploying her forces, Toy had her party attacking this monstrous creature from several sides at once.

"Kill it!" Toy cried.

They leapt on it where it lay gracelessly among the upper branches.

That great body heaved and those great wings fluttered in a vegetal parody of fright. Eight humans—all but Gren—hurled themselves among the feathery leafage of its back, stabbing deep into the epicarp at its rudimentary nervous system. Among that leafage lay other dangers. Disturbed from its slumbers, a tigerfly crawled from under the low-lying growth and came almost face to face with Poas.

Confronted with a yellow and black enemy as big as himself, the man child fell back squealing. On this later-day Earth, drowsing through the late afternoon of its existence, only a few families of the old orders of hymenoptera and diptera survived in mutated form: the treebees, the termights, the ants and the tigerflies—and the most dreadful were the tigerflies.

Veggy dashed to his friend's aid. Too late! Poas sprawled over on his back: the tigerfly was onto him. As the circular plates of its body arched, a ginger-tipped sabre of sting flashed out, burying itself into Poas' defenceless stomach. Its legs and arms gripped the boy, and with a hurried whirr of wings the tigerfly was bearing its paralyzed burden away. Veggy hurled his sword uselessly after it.

No time was available for bemoaning this accident. As pain filtered through to it, the suckerbird strove to fly away. Only Toy's frail noose held it down, and that might soon pull free.

Under the creature's belly, Gren heard Poas' cry and knew something was amiss. He saw the shaggy body heave, heard the wings crack in their frames as they beat the air. Twigs showered down on him, small branches snapped, leaves flew. The limb to which he clung vibrated.

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Panic filled Gren's mind. All he knew was that the suckerbird might escape, that it must die as soon as possible. Inexperienced, he stabbed out blindly at the sucker tongue that now threshed against the tree trunk in its efforts to break free.

He sliced with his knife again and again. A gash appeared in the living white hose. Earth and mud, sucked from the Ground and intended for the vegbird's nourishment, spurted out of it, plastering Gren with filth. The vegbird heaved convulsively and the wound widened.

For all his fear, Gren saw what was about to happen. He flung himself up, his long arms outstretched, grasped one of the bird's bud protuberances, and clung to it shaking. Anything was better than to be left alone in the mazes of the forest—where he might wander for years without coming on another group of humans.

The suckerbird fought to release itself. In its struggles, it tore its tongue off where Gren had gashed it. Abruptly it sailed free into the air.

In mortal terror, hugging fibres and leafage, Gren crawled onto the great back, where seven other frightened humans crouched. He joined them without a word.

The suckerbird swung upwards into the blinding sky. There blazed the sun, slowly building up its outpouring of energy towards that day—no longer incredibly distant—when it would turn nova and burn itself and its planets out. And beneath the suckerbird, which was twirling like the sycamore seed it resembled, swung endless vegetation that rose, rose as remorselessly as boiling milk to greet its lifesource: the vegetation that in these favourable hothouse conditions had grown to eclipse every other kind of living thing.

Toy was shouting.

"Slay the bird!" she called at them, rising on her knees, waving her sword. "Slay it fast! Chop it to bits. Kill it!"

With the sun bronze on her green skin, she looked wonderful. Gren slashed for her sake. Veggy and May worked together, carving a great hole through the tough rind of the bird, kicking away chunks of it. As the chunks fell they were snapped up by predators before hitting the forest.

Even semi-sentience has its limits of endurance. In a short while, the suckerbird was leaking sap from many gashes. Its stiff wings faltered in their broad sweeping movement. It began to sink down.

"Toy! Toy! My soul! Look there!" Driff cried. She pointed ahead at the shining entanglements towards which they were falling.

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None of the young humans had seen the sea; intuition, and a marrow-deep knowledge of the hazards of their planet, told them that they were being carried towards grave danger.

For it was a stretch of coast that rose up to meet them—and here was waged the most savage of all battles for survival, where the things of the land met the things of the ocean.

Clinging desperately to the suckerbird's leafage, Gren worked his way over to where Toy, Poyly, Shree, and May lay. He realized that he was much to blame for their present predicament, and longed to be helpful.

"We can call dumblers and fly to safety with them," he said.

"That's a good idea, Gren," Poyly said encouragingly, but Toy looked blankly at him.

"You try and call a dumbler, Gren," she said.

He did as he was bidden, distorting his face to whistle. The air rushing past them carried the sound away. They were in any case travelling too high for the whistlethistle seeds. Sulkily, Gren lapsed into silence, turning away from the others to see where they were getting to.

"I'd have thought of that idea if it had been any good," Toy said. She was a fool, thought Gren, and he ignored her.

The suckerbird was now losing height more slowly; it had reached a warm updraught of air and drifted along in it. Its lame and late efforts to turn inland again only seemed to take it parallel with the coast, so that the humans had the doubtful privilege of seeing what awaited them there.

Highly organized destruction was in progress, an almost silent battle without generals, waged for uncounted thousands of years. Or perhaps one side had a general. For the land was covered in a forest that was not a forest: it was one tree, one inexhaustible tree that, descended from the banyans of historic times, had grown and spread and sprawled and swallowed everything from shore to shore. Its had conquered the whole continent as far as the terminator that divided Earth's day from its night side; eventually it had almost conquered time, for its numberless trunks afforded it a life-span the end of which could not be foreseen. But the sea it could not conquer.

At the sea's edge, the mighty tree stopped and drew back.

Here, on the rocks, sands, and swamps of the coast, species of tree defeated by the banyan had made their last stand. The shore was their inhospitable home. Withered, deformed, defiant, they grew as they could. Where they grew was called Nomansland, for they were besieged on both sides.

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On their land side, the silent force of the tree opposed them. On their other side they had to face poisonous seaweeds and other antagonists that assailed them perpetually.

Over everything, indifferent begetter of all this carnage, shone the sun.

Now the wounded suckerbird dropped more rapidly. The humans could hear the slap of the seaweeds below. All nine of them had gathered close now, waiting helplessly.

More steeply fell the bird, slipping sideways. It veered over the sea, all the fringes of which were dappled by the vegetation growing in its tideless waters. Labouring, it swerved towards a narrow and stony peninsula that jutted into the sea.

"Look! A castle!" cried Toy.

The castle stood out on the peninsula, tall, thin, and grey, seeming to tilt crazily as the suckerbird flapped towards it. They swerved down. They were going to hit it. Evidently the dying creature had sighted the clear space at the base of the castle, had marked it as the only nearby place of safety, and was heading there.

But now its creaking wings like old sails in a storm paid no heed to their controls. The great body lumbered earthwards, nomansland and sea lurched up to meet it, castle and peninsula jarred towards it.

"Hold tightly, all!" Veggy yelled.

Next moment they crashed into one of the spires of the castle, the impact flinging them all forward. One wing split and tore as the suckerbird clung to a soaring buttress.

Toy saw what would happen next: the suckerbird must fall, taking the humans with it. Agile as a cat, she jumped down to one side, into a depression formed between the irregular tops of two buttresses and the main bulk of the castle. Then she called the others.

One by one they leapt across to her narrow platform, were caught and steadied. May was the last across. Clutching her wooden soul, she jumped to safety.

Helplessly, the suckerbird swivelled a striated eye at them. Toy had time to notice that the recent violent impact had split it clean across the great bulb of its body. Then it began to slip.

Its crippled wing slithered across the castle wall. Its grip relaxed. It fell.

They leant over the natural rampart and watched.

The suckerbird hit the clear ground by the base of the castle, and rolled over. With an effort it pulled itself up and staggered away from the grey pile, moving in a drunken semi-circle and trailing its wings.

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One wing brushed over the stony edge of the peninsula reflecting its tip in the motionless sea.

The face of the water puckered. From it shot great leathery strands of seaweed. These strands were punctuated along their length by bladder-like excrescences. They began to lash at the wing of the suckerbird.

At first the lashing was almost lethargic, but it quickly worked up to a faster tempo. More and more of the sea, up to a quarter of a mile out, was covered with the flailing seaweed that punished and struck at the water repeatedly in idiot hatred of all life but its own.

Directly it was struck, the suckerbird attempted to drag itself out of the way. But the reach of the seaweed, once it was enraged, was surprisingly long. It could strike almost to the base of the castle. Before the suckerbird could lurch to safety, the battery of blows had an unexpected effect on it.

Some of the bladder-like protrusions came down on the luckless being so hard that they burst. A dark iodine-like liquid sprayed up from them. The bladders were poison sacs.

Where the poison landed on the suckerbird, it gave off a rank brown steam.

The suckerbird could utter no cries to relieve its promptings of pain. At something between flight and hobble, it set off along the peninsula, heading for the shore, bounding into the air when it could to escape the seaweed. Its wings smouldered.

More than one kind of seaweed fringed that macabre coast. The frenzied bludgeoning stopped as suddenly as it had started.

In its stead, a long-toothed weed leapt out of the waters, raking the peninsular with its thorny teeth. Several fragments of rind were torn from the fleeing bird by these flails, but it was almost at the shore when it was hooked.

The teeth had it. More and more seaweed put out wavering arms and tugged at the suckerbird's wing. By now it could fight only feebly. It heeled over and hit the confused water. The whole sea developed mouths to meet it.

Eight frightened humans watched all this from the top of the castle.

"We can never get back to the safety of the trees," Fay whimpered. She was the youngest; she began to cry.

The seaweed had earnt but not yet won its prey. For the plants of nomansland had scented the prize. Squeezed as they were between jungle and sea, some of them, mangrove-like in form, had long ago waded out into the water. Others, more parasitic by nature, grew on their neighbours and sent out great stiff brambles that hung down towards the water like fishing rods.

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These two species, with others rapidly joining them, put forth claim to the victim, trying to snatch it from their marine enemies. From under the sea they threw up gnarled roots like the limbs of some antediluvian squid. They seized the suckerbird, and battle was joined.

At once it seemed that the whole coastline came alive. A fearful array of flails and barbs burst into action. Everything writhed deliriously. The sea was whipped into a spray that added to the horror by partially concealing it. Flying creatures, vegbirds and rayplanes, soared out of the forest to pick their own advantage from the fray.

In the mindless carnage, the suckerbird was pulverised and forgotten. Its flesh was tossed and lost in spume.

Toy stood up.

"We must go now," she said. "Get to shore."

Seven agonised faces regarded her as if she were mad.

"We shall die down there," Poyly said.

"No," Toy said fiercely. "*Now* we shall not die. Those things fight each other, so they will be too busy to hurt us. Later may be too late."

Toy's authority was not absolute. The group was unsure of itself. When she saw them beginning to argue, Toy fell into a rage. She boxed Fay and Shree on the ears. But her chief opponents were Veggy and May.

"We shall be killed there at any time," Veggy said. "There is no way to safety. Haven't we just seen what happened to the suckerbird?"

"We cannot stay here and die," Toy said angrily.

"We can stay and wait till something happens," May said. "Please let's stay!"

"Nothing will happen," Poyly said, taking her friend Toy's part. "Only bad things. It is the way."

"We shall be killed," Veggy repeated stubbornly.

In despair, Toy turned to Gren, the senior man-child.

"What do you say?" she asked.

Gren had watched all the destruction with a set face. It did not relax as he turned it towards Toy.

"You lead the group, Toy. Those who can obey you must do it. That is law."

Toy stood up.

"Poyly, Veggy, May, you others —follow me! We will go now while the things are too busy to see us. We must get back to the forest."

Without hesitation she swung a leg over the domed top of the buttress and began sliding down its steep side. Sudden panic filled the others in case they were left behind. They followed Toy. They swarmed over the top, slipping and scrambling down after her.

At the bottom, dwarfed by the grey height of the castle, they

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stood momentarily in a silent group. Awe held them there.

Their world held an aspect of flat unreality. Because the great sun burnt overhead, their shadows lay like disregarded dirt below their feet. Everywhere was this same lack of shadow, lending the landscape its flat look. It was as dead as a poor painting.

The coastal battle raged like a fever. There was in this era (as in a sense there had always been) only Nature. Nature was supreme mistress of everything; and in the end it was as if she had laid a curse on her handiwork.

With an effort, Toy moved forward.

As they ran after Toy and away from that mysterious castle, their feet tingled; the stones beneath their feet were stained with brown poison. In the heat it had dried to harmlessness.

The noise of battle filled their ears. Spume drenched them—but the combatants paid them no attention, so absorbed were they in their mindless antagonism. Frequent explosions now added a new note to it. Some of the no-mansland trees, beleaguered for century after century in their narrow strips, had plunged their roots down into the meagre sands to find not only nourishment but a way of defence against their enemies. They had discovered charcoal, they had drawn up sulphur, they had mined potassium nitrate. In their knotty entrails they had refined and mixed them.

The gunpowder that resulted had been carried up through sappy veins to nut cases in the topmost branches. These branches now hurled their explosive weapons at the seaweeds. The torpid sea writhed.

Toy's plan was not a good one: it succeeded through luck rather than judgement. To one side of the land end of the peninsula, a great mass of seaweed had threshed itself far out of the water and covered a gunpowder tree. By sheer weight, it was pulling the tree down into the water. A fight to the death raged about it. The little humans burst past, and fled into the shelter of tall couch grass.

Only then did they realise Gren was not with them.

Gren still lay in the blinding sun, hunched behind the ramparts of the castle.

Fear had been the chief but not the only cause for his remaining behind. He had felt, as he had said, that obedience was important. Yet he was by nature hard put to it to obey. Particularly so in this case, when the plan Toy put forward seemed to offer such slight hope of survival. Also, he had an idea of his own, though he found it impossible to express verbally.

"Oh, how can anyone speak!" he said to himself. "There seem so

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few words. Once there must have been more words!"

His idea concerned the castle.

The rest of the group were less thoughtful than Gren. Directly they had landed on it, their attention had been directed elsewhere. Not so Gren's. He realised that the castle was not of rock. It had been built with intelligence. Only one species could have built it. And that species would have a safe way from the castle to the coast.

So in a little while, after Gren had watched his companions run down the stony path, he rapped with his knife handle on the structure.

At first the knock went unanswered.

Without warning, a section of the tower behind Gren swung open. He turned at the faint sound, to face eight termights emerging from darkness.

Of all the old non-vegetable families of Earth, very few had survived apart from the termights and the humans. Once declared enemies, now they faced each other almost in kinship, as though the teeming millennia of change had wrought a bond between them. Now that men were the outcasts rather than the inheritors of Earth, they met the insects on equal terms.

The termights surrounded Gren and inspected him, their mandibles working. He stood still, motionless as their white bodies brushed round him. They were nearly as big as he was. He could smell their smell, acrid but not wholly unpleasant.

When they had satisfied themselves that Gren was harmless, the termights marched to the ramparts. From all appearances they were staring out at the battle. Whether they could see or not in glaring daylight Gren did not know, but at least they could hear the sounds of the sea struggle clearly enough.

Tentatively, Gren moved over to the opening in the tower. A strange cool odour drifted from it.

Two of the termights came rapidly across and barred his way. Their jaws were level with his throat.

"I want to go down," he told them. "I will be no trouble. Let me come inside."

One of the creatures disappeared down the hole. In a minute it returned with another termight. Gren shrank back. The new termight had a gigantic growth on its head.

The growth was a leprous brown in colour, spongy in texture, and pitted like the honeycomb the treebees made. It proliferated over the termight's cranium, growing round its neck like a ruff. Despite this fearsome burden, the termight seemed active enough. It came forward and the others made way for it. It seemed to stare, then turned away.

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Scratching in the grit underfoot, it began to draw. Crudely but clearly, it sketched a tower and a line, and connected the two by a narrow strip formed with two parallel lines. The single line was evidently intended to represent the coast, the strip, the peninsula.

Gren was completely surprised by this. He had never heard of such artistic abilities in insects before. He walked round gazing at the lines.

The termight stepped back and seemed to regard Gren. Obviously something was expected of him. Pulling himself together, he stooped down and falteringly added to the sketch. He drew a line from the top of the tower down the middle of it, through the middle of the strip and to the coast. Then he pointed to himself.

Whether the creatures understood this or not was hard to say. They simply turned and hurried back into the tower. Deciding there was nothing else for it, Gren followed them. This time they did not stop him; evidently his request had been understood.

That strange sunless smell enveloped him.

It was nerve-wracking in the tower when the entrance closed above them. After the sun-flooded brilliance outside, everything here was pitch dark.

Fortunately, to descend the tower was easy for one as agile as Gren, since it was much like climbing down a natural chimney, with plenty of protrusions on all sides to cling onto. He swarmed down hand over fist with growing confidence.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the dark, Gren saw that a faint luminescence clung to the bodies of the termights, giving them ghostly shape. Many of them were present in the tower, utterly silent. Like phantoms they seemed to move on every side, noiseless rows of them trundling up into the dark, noiseless rows of them trundling down. He could not guess what they were busy at.

Eventually he and his guides reached the bottom of the castle and stood on level ground. According to Gren's estimation, they must now be below the level of the sea. The atmosphere was moist and heavy.

Only the termight with the growth accompanied Gren now; the others moved off in military order without looking back. Gren noted a curious green light composed as much of shadow as of illumination; at first he could not detect its source. He was hard put to it to follow his guide. The corridor they traversed was uneven and full of traffic. Termights were everywhere, moving purposefully: there were also other small creatures about, herded along by the hosts, sometimes singly, sometimes in flocks.

"Not so fast," Gren cried, but

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his guide kept to its steady pace, paying him no attention.

The green light was stronger now. It lay mistily on either side of their route. Gren saw it filtered through irregular mica sheets evidently set there by the creative genius of the tunnelling insects. These mica sheets formed windows looking out into the sea, through which the activities of the menacing seaweed could be viewed.

Obviously the termights were highly organised. Yet Gren felt increasingly uneasy. Meeting the creatures among the trunks and leaves of the forest was one thing; here it was entirely another. Here their alien quality was revealed. Also, not a few bore the same horrible growth as his guide. Gren could not help wondering if this disease was contagious.

He stumbled on. Beyond the mica panes, seaweed writhed like death in slow motion.

The industry of this underground place amazed him. At least the denizens were so busy that they kept to themselves; not one paused to inspect him.

Suddenly one of them did approach. It was not a termight but one of the alien things living in the termight domain. Four-legged and furry, it possessed a tail and luminous yellow eyes; it stood almost as high as Gren. Eyeing him through its glowing pupils, the creature cried "Miaow!" and tried to rub itself against Gren. Its whiskers brushed his arm. Shuddering, he dodged it and pressed on.

The furry creature looked back at him almost with a quality of regret. Then it turned to follow some termights, the species that now tolerated and fed it. A moment later Gren saw several more of these mewing things; some of them were infected with and almost covered by the fungus growth.

Gren and his guide came at last to where the broad tunnel divided into several lesser ones. Unhesitatingly, the guide chose a fork that sloped upwards into darkness. The darkness was broken suddenly as the termight pushed up a flat stone that covered the tunnel mouth and crawled into daylight.

"You've been very kind," Gren said as he crawled out too. He kept as much distance as possible between himself and the brown growth.

The termight scurried back into the hole, pulling the stone into place with never a backward glance.

Nobody needed to tell Gren that he was now in Nomansland.

He could smell the smell of the sullen sea. He could hear the sound of the battle between the seaweeds and the land plants; though the noise was intermittent now, as both sides tired. He could see a

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tension round him that never existed in the gentle middle levels of the forest where the human group had been born. Above all, he could see the sun glaring through the matted leaves over his head.

Underfoot, the ground was sour and pasty, a mixture of clay and sand with rock frequently outcropping. It was infertile stuff, and the trees growing from it showed their sickness. Their trunks were distorted, their foliage meagre. Many of them had intertwined in an attempt to support each other; and where this attempt had failed, they lay spilled over the ground in horrible distortions. Moreover, some of them through the long centuries had evolved such curious ways of defending themselves that they hardly resembled tree forms at all.

Gren decided that his best policy was to creep to the land end of the peninsula and try and pick up the tracks of Toy and the others from there. Once he got to the sea's edge, it should not be hard to see the peninsular; it would make a prominent landmark.

He had no doubt in which direction the sea lay, for he was able to look through the distorted trees and see the landward border of nomansland. That was clearly marked.

Along a line that marked the end of good soil, the great banyan had established its outer perimeter. It stood unshakeably, though its boughs were scarred by innumerable assaults from bramble and claw. And to assist it, to help it repel the banished species of nomansland, the creatures that used its shelter had gathered: trappersnappers, wiltmilts, berrywishes, pluggyrugs, and others stood ready to scourge the slightest movement along their perimeter.

Keeping this formidable barrier at his back, Gren moved cautiously forward.

His progress was slow. Every sound made him jump. At one point he flung himself flat as a fleet of long deadly needles was launched from a thicket at his stomach. Lifting his head cautiously, he saw a cactus shaking itself and rearranging its defences. He had never seen a cactus before. His stomach was like water to think of all the unknown perils about him.

A little later he met something even stranger.

He stepped through a tree whose trunk had contorted itself into a loop. As he did so, the loop snapped together. Gren escaped constriction by the skin of his teeth and did lose skin from his legs. As he lay panting, an animal slid past, almost near enough to touch.

It was a reptile, long and armoured, with a mirthless grin that revealed many teeth. Once (in the vanished days when humans had a

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name for everything) it had been called an alligator. It peered through goat's eyes at Gren, then scuttled under a log.

Almost all animals had died out millennia ago. The sheer weight of vegetable growth, as the sun favoured green things, had crushed and extinguished them. Yet as the last of the old guard were beaten back to the swamps and the fringes of the ocean, a few animals had retreated with them. So, small in numbers, they protracted their existence in nomansland, enjoying the heat and the savour of life while life lasted.

Going more cautiously now, Gren moved forward again.

By now, the hubbub from the sea had abated. He travelled in dead quiet. Everything was silent as if waiting, as if under a curse.

The ground began to shelve gradually towards the water. Shingle rasped underfoot. The trees which had grown more sparsely clustered together again to withstand possible attacks from the sea.

Gren halted. Anxiety still moved in his heart. He longed to be back with the others. Yet his feeling was not that he had behaved stubbornly in remaining behind on the termight castle, but that they had behaved foolishly in not offering to accept his lead.

Looking round him cautiously, he let out a whistle. No answer came. A sudden stillness settled, as if even those things that had no ears were listening.

Panic seized Gren.

"Toy!" he cried. "Veggy! Poyly! Where are you?"

As he was calling, a cage descended from the foliage above him and pinned him to the ground.

When Toy led her six fellows to the shore, they flung themselves into long grass and hid their eyes to recover from their fright. Their bodies were foam-drenched from the vegetable battle.

At last they sat up and discussed Gren's absence. Since he was a man child, he was valuable; though they could not go back for him, they could wait for him. It remained only to find a place where they could wait in comparative safety.

"We will not wait long," Veggy said. "Gren had no need to stay behind. Let us leave him and forget him."

"We need him for mating," Toy said simply.

"I will mate with you," Veggy said. "I am a man child with a big mater to stick into you. I will mate with all you women before the figs come again! I am riper than the figs."

And in his excitement he stood up and danced, showing off his body to the women, who were not averse to it. He was now their only man child; was he not desirable?

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May jumped up to dance with him. Veggy ran at her. Ducking lithely, she shot away. He capered after. She was laughing, he shouting.

"Come back!" Toy and Poyly called furiously.

Unheeding, May and Veggy ran from the grass onto sloping sand and shingle. Almost at once a great arm shot up from the sand and grasped May's ankle. As she screamed, another arm came up, then another, fastening on her. May fell on her face, kicking in terror. Veggy flung himself savagely into the attack, pulling out his knife as he did so. Other arms came up from the sand and grasped him too.

When plant life had conquered the Earth, the animals least affected had been those of the sea. Theirs was an environment less susceptible to change than land. Nevertheless, the growth in size and intelligence of the marine algae had forced many of them to change their habits or habitat.

The new monster seaweeds had proved expert at catching crabs, at wrapping them in a greedy frond as they scuttled over the ocean bed, or at trapping them beneath stones at that vulnerable time when the crabs were growing new shells. In a few million years, the brachyura were all but extinct.

Meanwhile, the octopuses were already in trouble with the seaweeds. The extinction of the crabs deprived them of a chief item in their diet. These and other factors forced them to an entirely new mode of life. Many of them left the oceans, compelled away from the waters both to avoid the seaweeds and to seek food. They became shore-dwellers—and the sand octopus evolved.

Toy and the other humans flew to Veggy's rescue, terrified by this threat to their only manchild. Sand flew as they hurled themselves into the fight. But the sand octupus had arms enough to deal with all seven of them. Without raising its body from where it was safely hidden, it took them all in its tentacles, fight how they might.

Their knives were of little use against that rubbery embrace. One by one, their faces were pressed down into the slithering sand and their shouts stifled.

For all that they had finally triumphed, the vegetables had triumphed as much by weight of numbers as by inventiveness. Time and again, they succeeded simply by imitating some ploy used long since—perhaps on a smaller scale—in the animal kingdom. The traverser, that mightiest of all plant-creatures, flourished simply by adopting the way of life chosen by the humble spider back in the Carboniferous Age.

In nomansland, where the struggle to survive was possibly at

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its most intense, this process was particularly noticeable. The willows were a living example of it; they had copied the sand octopus. By so doing, they had become the most invincible beings along that dreadful coast.

Killerwillows now lived submerged under sand and shingle, only their foliage occasionally showing. Their roots had acquired a steely flexibility and become tentacles. To one of these brutes the group now owed its lives.

A sand octopus was obliged to stifle its prey as soon as possible. A struggle that lasted long attracted its rivals, the killerwillows; for those that imitated it had become its deadliest enemies. They moved up on it now, two of them, heaving themselves along under the sand with only their leaves showing like innocent bushes, and a furrow of disturbed dirt behind.

Suddenly they attacked.

Their roots were long and sinewy, without sensation, fearfully tough. One from one side, one from the other, they took a hold on the tentacles of the sand octopus. It knew that deadly grip. It recognised that obscene strength. Relinquishing its hold on the humans, it turned to fight the killerwillows for its life.

With a heave that sent the group scattering, it emerged from the sand, its beak agape, its pale eyes round with fright. Giving a sudden twist, one of the killerwillows sent it sprawling upside down. The sand octopus twisted back into position, managing to free all its tentacles but one as it did so. Angrily, it pecked off the tentacle being held with one savage bite, as if its own flesh were the enemy.

Close at hand lay the sullen sea. Its impulse was to retreat there in an emergency. But even as it began its frantic scuttle, the tentacular roots of the killerwillows thrashed blindly about, seeking for it. They found it! The octopus whipped up a curtain of sand and pebbles in its fury.

But the killerwillows had it—and between them they commanded some thirtyfive knotty legs.

Forgetting itself, the group stared fascinated at this unequal duel. Then the blindly waving arms flashed in their direction.

"Run!" Toy cried, picking herself up.

"It's got Fay!" Driff screamed.

The smallest of the group had been caught. Searching for a hold, one of those thin white tentacles of roots had wrapped Fay round the chest. She could not even cry out. Her face and arms went purple. Next second she was lifted up and dashed brutally against the trunk of a nearby tree. They saw her half-severed body roll bloodily over into the sand.

"It is the way," Poyly said sickly. "Let's move!"

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They fled into the nearest thicket and lay gasping there. As they mourned the loss of their youngest companion, the sounds came to them of the sand octopus being shredded into pieces.

For a long while after the horrible noises had stopped, the six members of the group lay where they were. At last Toy sat up and spoke to them.

"You see what has happened because you do not let me lead you," she said. "Gren is lost. Now Fay is dead. Soon we will all be dead and our souls rotting."

"We must get out of nomansland," said Veggy sulkily. He was aware that he was to blame for the incident with the sand octopus.

"We shall get nowhere," Toy snapped, "until you obey me. Do you have to die before you know that? After this, you do what I say. Do you understand, Veggy?"

"Yes."

"May?"

"Yes."

"And you, Driff and Shree?"

"Yes," they said, and Shree added, "I'm hungry."

"Follow me quietly," Toy said, tucking her soul more securely into her belt.

She led them, testing every step she took.

By now, the din of the sea battle was abating. Several trees had been dragged down into the water. At the same time, much seaweed had been fished out of the sea. This was now being eagerly tossed among the victor trees, anxious as they were for nourishment in that barren soil.

As the group crept forward, a soft-pelted thing rushed past on four legs and was gone before they had their wits about them.

"We could have eaten that," Shree said grumpily. "Toy promised us the suckerbird to eat and we never got it."

The thing had scarcely disappeared before there was a scuffle in the direction it had taken, a squeal, a hasty gobbling sound, and then silence.

"Something else ate it," Toy whispered. "Spread out and we'll stalk it. Knives ready!"

They fanned out and slid through the long grass, happy to engage in positive action. This part of the business of living they understood.

To track down the source of that quick gobbling sound was easy. For the source was in captivity and could not move away.

From a particularly gnarled tree a pole hung; attached to the bottom of the pole was a crude cage consisting of only a dozen wooden bars. The bars dug down into the ground. Contained in the cage, its snout protruding one way, its tail another, was a young alligator. Some scattered pieces of pelt lay by its jaws, the remains of

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the furry thing the group had seen alive five minutes before.

The alligator stared at the humans as they emerged from the long grass. They stared at it.

"We can kill it. It cannot move," May said.

"We can eat it," Shree said. "Even my soul is hungry."

Urged by this remark, they moved forward.

The alligator, thanks to its armour, proved difficult to kill. Right at the onset, its tail sent Driff spinning into a pile of shingle, where she cut her face badly. But by stabbing at it from all sides, and by blinding it, they at last exhausted it enough for Toy to thrust her hand bravely into the cage and cut the creature's throat.

As the reptile threshed about in its death agony, a curious thing happened. The bars of the cage slid upwards so that their pronged ends emerged from the ground, and the whole contraption clenched together like a hand. The straight pole above it twisted into several loops; it and the cage vanished up into the green boughs of the tree.

With exclamations of awe, the group seized their alligator and ran.

Winding their way through tight-packed tree trunks, they came on a bare outcrop of rock. It looked like a safe refuge, particularly as it was fringed by a spikey local variant of the whistlethistle.

Crouching on the rock, they began their unlovely meal. Even Driff joined in, though her face still bled.

Scarcely were their jaws in motion than they heard Gren calling for help near at hand.

"Wait here and guard the food," Toy commanded. "Poyly will come with me. We will go and find Gren and bring him back here."

Her command was a good one. To travel with food was never wise; travelling alone was dangerous enough.

She and Poyly skirted the thistles. Again Gren's cry came to guide them. With care the two girls moved round a bank of mauve cactus, and there he lay. He sprawled face downward under a tree similar to the one beneath which the alligator had been killed, penned in a cage similar to the alligator's.

"Oh Gren!" cried Poyly.

Even as they ran towards him, a trailer creeper swung at him from the limb of a nearby tree, a creeper with a wet red mouth at its extremity, bright as a flower, poisonous-looking as a dripperlip. It swooped for Gren's head.

Poyly's feelings for Gren went deep.

Without thought, she flung herself at the creeper, meeting it as it swung forward, catching it as high as possible to avoid those

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pulpy lips. Drawing a new knife, she severed the stem that pulsed beneath her fingers. Then she dropped back lightly to the ground. It was easy to avoid the mouth that now writhed there, ineffectually pursing and opening.

"Above you, Poyly!" Toy cried in warning, darting forward. The parasite, alerted now to danger, uncurled a full dozen trailing mouths. Bright and deadly, they swung about Poyly's head. But Toy was beside her. Expertly they lopped away, till milk spurted from the creeper's wounds, till the mouths lay gasping at their feet. Vegetable reaction time is not the fastest thing in the universe, perhaps because it is never prompted by pain.

Breathing hard, the two girls turned their attention to Gren.

"Can you get me out?" he asked, looking up helplessly at them.

"I am leader. Of course I can get you out," Toy said. Using some of the knowledge she had gained from dealing with the alligator, she said, "This cage is a part of the tree. We will make it move and let you go."

She knelt down and began to saw at the bars of the cage with her knife.

Over the great mass of the land where the banyan ruled, covering everything with a layer of green half a mile deep, the chief problem for lesser breeds was to propagate their kind. With plants like the whistlethistle that had developed the curious dumblers, and the burnurn that had turned its seedcases into weapons, the solution to this problem was ingenious.

No less ingenious were some of the solutions of the flora of nomansland to their particular problem. Here the main problem was less one of propagation than of sustenance; this accounted for the radical difference between these outcasts of the beaches and their cousins inland.

Some trees like the mangroves waded into the sea and procured the deadly seaweeds for mulch. Others like the killerwillows took on the habits of animals, hunting like carnivores and nourishing themselves on decomposed flesh. But the oak, as one million year stretch of sunlight succeeded another, shaped some of its extremities into cages and caught animals alive, letting their dung feed its starved roots. Or if they eventually starved to death, in decomposing they would still feed the tree.

Nothing of this Toy knew. She only knew that Gren's cage should move, just as the one enclosing the alligator had done. Grimly, with Poyly, she hacked at the bars.

"No use. I tried that. The wood's too tough," Gren said, peering up despairingly into the foliage overhead.

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Disregarding him, the two girls worked at each of the twelve bars in turn. Perhaps the oak assumed the damage being done was greater than in fact it was; the bars were suddenly pulled from the ground and the whole contraption sprang up into the boughs above them.

Ignoring tabu, the girls grabbed Gren and ran with him back to the rest of the party.

When they were reunited, they devoured the alligator meat, two of them keeping guard as they did so. All the same, it was something of a triumphal feast.

Not without a certain amount of boasting, Gren told them of what he had seen inside the termights' nest. They were unbelieving.

"Termights have not enough sense to do all that you say," Veggy said.

"You all saw the castle they made. You sat on it."

"In the forest, termights have not so much sense," May said, backing Veggy up as usual.

"This is not the forest," Gren said. "New things happen here. Terrible things."

"Only in your head they happen," May teased. "You tell us about these funny things so that we will forget you did wrong to disobey Toy. How could there be windows underground to look out onto the sea?"

"I tell you only what I saw," Gren said. He was angry now. "In nomansland, things are different. It is the way. Many termights also had a bad fungus growth on them such as I have not seen before. I have seen this fungus again since then. It looks bad."

"Where did you see it?" Shree asked.

Gren threw a curiously shaped piece of glass into the air and caught it, perhaps pausing to create suspense, perhaps because he was not keen to mention his recent fright.

"When I was caught by the snaptrap tree," he said, "I looked up into its branches. There among the leaves I saw a fearful thing. I could not see what it was. Then the leaves stirred. I saw one of the fungi that grew on the termights, all shining like an eye and growing on the tree."

Toy stood up.

"Too many things bring death here," she said. "Now we must move back to the forest where we can live happily. Get up, all of you."

"Let me finish this bone off," Shree said.

"Get up, all of you. Tuck your souls in your belts."

Gren slipped his curious glass into a pocket and jumped up first to show he was anxious to obey. As the others stood up too, a dark shadow passed overhead; instinctively, they all flung themselves

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down. Two rayplanes fluttered overhead, locked in combat.

Over the disputed strip called nomansland many sorts of vegbird passed, both those that fed at sea and those that fed on land. They passed without alighting, knowing well the dangers that lurked there. Their shadows sped and dappled over the outcast plants with no pause.

But the rayplanes were so mortally engaged they did not know where they went. With a crash they sprawled among the upper branches near which the group crouched.

At once nomansland sprang to life.

The famished angry trees spread up and lashed their branches. Toothed briars uncurled. Gigantic nettles shook their bearded heads. Moving cactus crawled and launched its spikes. Climbers hurled sticky bolas at the enemy. Cat-like creatures, such as Gren had seen in the termights' nest, bounded past and swarmed up the trees to get to the attack. Everything that could move, did so, prodded on by hunger. On the instant, nomansland turned itself into a war machine.

Those plants that possessed no sort of mobility came alert for secondary spoils. The thicket of whistlethistles near which the group now lay trembling shook its thorns in anticipation. Harmless enough in its normal habitat, here the need to feed its roots had goaded the whistlethistle into a more offensive role. It would impale any passer-by it could. Similarly, a hundred other plants, small and stationary and armed, prepared to ignore the doomed rayplanes but to feed on those who—returning carelessly from *their* feed—blundered into their orbit.

A great killerwillow appeared, heaving itself into view with root-tentacles waving. Sand and grit poured off its pollarded head as it struggled up. Soon it too was grappling with the luckless rayplanes, with the snaptrap trees, and indeed with any living thing whose existence offended it.

The scene was chaos. The rayplanes never had a chance.

"Look—there's some of the fungus!" Gren exclaimed, pointing.

In among the short snake-like branches that formed the head of the killerwillow grew the deadly fungus. Nor was this the first time Gren had seen it since the rayplanes crashed. Several of the plants lumbering past had borne traces of it. Gren shuddered at the sight, but the others were less impressed. Death, after all, had many shapes; everyone knew it; it was the way.

Twigs showered on them from the target area. The rayplanes were shredded by now; the fight was among the feasters.

"We are too close to trouble," Poyly said. "Let's move."

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"I was about to order it myself," Toy said stiffly.

They scrambled up and made their way as best they could. All were armed now with long poles which they thrust out before them to test the ground for danger. The fearful remorselessness of the killerwillows had struck caution into their hearts.

For a long while they moved, overcoming obstacle after obstacle and frequently avoiding death. Finally they were overcome—by sleep.

They found a fallen trunk of a tree that was hollow. They beat out the poisonous leafy creature that lived in it, and slept there, curled up together and feeling secure. When they awoke, they were prisoners. Both ends of the tree trunk were sealed.

Driff, who was the first to rouse and discover this, set up a howl that quickly brought the others to investigate. No doubt of it, they were now sealed in and liable to suffocation. The walls of the tree that previously had felt dry and rotten were now tacky, dripping a sweetish syrup onto them. In fact, they were about to be digested!

The fallen trunk was nothing more than an abdomen into which they had thoughtlessly climbed.

After eons of time, the bellyelm had entirely abandoned its earlier attempts to draw nourishment from the inhospitable shores of nomansland. Retracting all form of root structure, it had adopted its present horizontal mode of living. It camouflaged itself as a dead log. Its branch and leaf system had become separate, evolving into the symbiotic leafy creature the group had beaten off—a symbiotic creature that acted as a useful decoy to lure other beings into the open stomach of its partner.

Though the bellyelm normally attracted only vegetal creatures into its maw, flesh also satisfied its nutritive requirements. Seven little humans were very welcome.

The seven little humans fought savagely, slithering in the dirty dark as they attacked the strange plant with knives. Nothing they did had any effect. The syrupy rain came down faster, as the bellyelm worked up an appetite.

"It's no good," Toy gasped. "Rest."

Close together, they squatted on their haunches. Baffled, frightened, numbed by the dark, they could only squat.

Gren tried to make a useful picture come into his head. He concentrated, ignoring the muck trickling down his back.

He tried to remember what the trunk had looked like outside. They were seeking somewhere to sleep when they came on it. They had climbed up a slope, skirting a suspicious patch of bare sand, and found the bellyelm lying at the top of the incline in short grass. Externally, it had been smooth.

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"Ha!" he exclaimed in the dark.

"What is it?" Veggy asked. He was angry with them all; was he not a man, who should have been protected from this danger and indignity?

"We will all throw ourselves against this wall together," Gren said. "That way we may be able to make the tree roll."

Veggy snorted in the dark.

"How will that help us?" he asked.

"Do what he says, you little worm!" Toy's voice was savage. They all jumped at its lash. She, as much as Veggy, could not guess what Gren had in mind, but she had to keep authority. "All push at this wall, quickly."

In the gummy mess they scrambled together, touching each other to discover whether they were all facing the same way.

"All ready?" Toy asked. "Push! And again! Push! Push!"

Their toes slithered in the tacky sap, but they pushed. Toy called encouragement.

The bellyelm rolled.

Now they were all caught in excitement. They heaved gladly, shouting in unison. And the bellyelm rolled again. And again. And then continuously.

Suddenly there was no further need to push. As Gren had hoped, the trunk began to roll down the slope of its own accord. Seven humans found themselves somersaulting at increasing speed.

"Get ready to run as soon as you get the chance," Gren called. "*If* you get the chance."

When it hit sand, the bellyelm slowed its pace. When the incline flattened out, it stopped. Its partner, the leafy creature, which had been pursuing it meanwhile, now caught up. It jumped on top of the trunk and plugged its lower appendages firmly into the runnels of the trunk.

But it had no time to preen.

Something moved beneath the sand. A white root-like tentacle appeared, and another. They waved, then grasped the bellyelm. As the leafy thing scuttled for its life, a killerwillow heaved itself up into view.

Still trapped inside the trunk, the humans heard the bellyelm groan as it was seized. Gren interpreted the sound aright, for what he had anticipated had happened.

"Get ready to jump clear," he whispered.

Few things could resist the clutches of a killerwillow. Its present victim was utterly defenseless. Beneath the grip of those hawser-like tentacles, it cracked with a sound of snapping ribs. Hopelessly, tugged from more than one direction, it broke apart like a cracker.

As daylight splintered into being about them, the group jumped for safety.

Only Driff did not jump. She

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was trapped at one end of the trunk as it caved in. Frantically she cried and struggled, but could not get loose. The others—bounding for long grass—halted and looked back.

Toy and Poyly glanced at each other, then ran to the rescue.

"Come back, you fools!" Gren cried. "It will get you too!"

Unheeding, they ran back to Driff. In a panic, Gren rushed after them.

"Come away!" he shouted.

Three yards from them rose the great body of the killerwillow. In its poll fungus glistened, the dark crinkled fungus they had seen before. It was terrible to behold—Gren could not understand how the others dared to stay. He thumped Toy on her back and screamed at her to come away and save her soul.

She took no notice. Within inches of those strangulating white roots, she and Poyly struggled to set Driff free. The latter's leg was caught between two sandwiching slabs of wood. At last one of these shifted, so that she could be dragged away. Seizing her between them, Poyly and Toy ran for the long grass where the others crouched, and Gren ran with them.

For minutes they all lay panting. All were covered in stickiness and filth until they were nearly unrecognisable.

Toy was the first to sit up. She turned to Gren and said in a voice cold with rage, "Gren, I dismiss you from the group. You are an outcast from now on."

Gren jumped up, tears in his eyes. Banishment was the most terrible punishment that could be used against anyone. It was rarely invoked against females; to invoke it against a male was almost unheard of.

"You can't do this!" he cried. "Why should you do this? You have no reason."

"You hit me," Toy said. "I am your leader but you hit me. You tried to stop Driff from being rescued. You would have let her die. And always you want your own way."

"It's lies, lies!"

"No, it is true." Then she weakened and turned to the five faces anxiously regarding her. "Isn't it true?"

Driff, clutching her hurt leg, agreed heartily that it was. Shree, being Driff's friend, also agreed. Veggy and May merely nodded their heads without speaking; they were feeling guilty because they had not also gone to the rescue of Driff, and compensated for it by backing up Toy now. The only note of dissent came unexpectedly from Toy's dearest friend, Poyly.

"Never mind if what you say is true or not," Poyly declared. "But for Gren we would now be dead inside that bellyelm. He saved us

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there, and we should be grateful."

"No, the killerwillow saved us," Toy said.

"If it had not been for Gren—"

"Keep out of this, Poyly. You saw him hit me. He must go from the group. I say he must be outcast."

Now the two women faced each other angrily, hands on knives, their cheeks red.

"He is our man. We cannot let him go!" Poyly said.

"We have Veggy still, or have you forgotten?"

"Veggy is only a man child, and you know it!"

Angrily Veggy jumped up.

"I'm old enough to do it to you, Poyly, you fat thing," he cried, hopping about. "Look how I'm made—just as good as Gren!"

But they cuffed him down and went on quarrelling. Benefiting by this example, the others also began to quarrel. Only when Gren burst into angry tears did they fall silent.

"You are all fools," he cried between his sobs. "I know how to get out of nomansland but you don't. How can you do it without me?"

"We can do what we want without you," Toy said, but she added, "What is your plan?"

Gren laughed bitterly.

"You are a fine leader, Toy! You don't even know where we are. You don't even realise that we are on the edge of nomansland. Look, you can see our forest from here."

He pointed dramatically with outstretched finger.

In their hurried escape from the bellyelm, they had hardly taken in their new surroundings. There was little room for doubt that Gren was right. As he said, they stood on the fringe of nomansland.

Beyond them, the gnarled and stunted trees of the region grew more closely, as if tightening their ranks. Among them were spiky soldier trees, thorn and bamboo, as well as tall grasses with edges sharp enough to lop off a human arm. All were woven together by an absolute barricade of brambles. It was a thicket impossible to penetrate, suicide to enter. Every plant stood at guard like troops facing a common enemy.

Nor was the common enemy a reassuring sight.

The great banyan, pushing outwards as far as its fantastic nutritional requirements would allow, loomed high and black over the outcasts of nomansland. Its outermost branches bore an abnormally dense thatch of leaves; they reached out as far as possible over the enemy like a wave ever about to break, cutting off as much sunlight as possible.

Aiding the banyan were the creatures that lived in its forest aisles, the trappersnappers, the jack-in-the-box wiltmilts, the berrywhishes, the deadly dripperlips

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and others. They patrolled the perimeters of the mighty tree like eternal watchdogs.

The forest, so welcoming to the humans in theory, presented only its claws to them from where they now stood.

Gren watched their faces as the others regarded that double wall of hostile vegetation. Nothing moved; the lightest breeze slinking in from the sea hardly shifted one armoured leaf; only their bowels stirred in dread.

"You see," Gren said. "Leave me here! Let me watch you walk through that barrier! I want to see you do it."

He had the initiative now and gloried in it.

They looked at him, at the barrier, back at him.

"*You* don't know how to get through," Veggy said uneasily.

Gren sneered.

"I know a way," he said flatly.

"Do you think the termights will help you?" Poyly asked him.

"No."

"What then?"

He stared at them defiantly. Then he faced Toy.

"I will show you the way if you follow me. Toy has no brains. I have brains. I will not be outcast. I will lead you instead of Toy. Make me leader and I'll get you to safety."

"Pah, you man child," Toy said. "You talk too much. You boast." But the others were muttering.

"Women are leaders, not men," Shree said, with doubt in her voice.

"Toy is a bad leader," Gren shouted.

"No, she's not," said Driff, and the others murmured agreement with this, even Poyly. Though their faith in Toy was not unbounded, their trust in Gren was small. Poyly went to him and said quietly, "You know the law and the way of humans. They will outcast you if you do not tell them a good way to safety."

"And if I do tell them?" His truculence faded. Poyly was fair to look upon.

"Then you stay with us as is right. But you must not expect to lead in Toy's place. That is not right."

"I will say what is right or not."

"That is not right either."

"You are a right person, Poyly. Make no argument with me."

"I do not want to see you outcast."

"Look, then!" And Gren turned towards the rest of them. From a pocket he produced the curiously shaped piece of glass some of them had seen him handling earlier. He held it out in his open palm.

"This I picked up when I was trapped by the snaptrap tree," he told them. "It is called mica or glass. Perhaps it came from the sea. Perhaps it is what the termights use for their windows onto the sea."

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Toy made to examine it, but he pulled his hand back.

"Hold it in the sun and it makes a little sun beneath it. When I was trapped, I burned my hand with it. I could have burnt my way out of the trap if you had not come along. So we can burn our way out of nomansland. Light some sti-ks and grass here and the flame will grow. The little breeze will tickle it towards the forest. Nothing likes fire—and where the fire has been we can follow."

They all stared at each other.

"Gren is very clever," Poyly said.

"It won't work," Toy said stubbornly.

In a sudden rage, Gren hurled the crude lens at her.

"You stupid girl! Your head is full of leaves. You should be outcast! You should be driven off!"

She caught the lens and backed away.

"Gren, you are mad! You don't know what you say. Go away," she shouted.

Gren turned savagely to Veggy.

"You see how she treats me, Veggy! We cannot have her for leader. We two must go or she must."

"Toy never hurt me," Veggy said sullenly, anxious to avoid quarrelling.

Toy caught their mood and used it quickly.

"There can be no arguing in the group or the group will die. It is the way. Gren or I must go, and you all must decide which it is to be. Cast your vote now. Speak anyone who would turn me away rather than Gren."

"Unfair!" Poyly cried. Then an uneasy silence fell. Nobody spoke.

"Gren must go," Driff whispered.

Gren pulled out a knife. Veggy at once jumped up and drew his. May behind him did the same. Soon they all stood armed against Gren. Only Poyly did not move.

Gren's face was thin with bitterness.

"Give me back my glass," he said, holding out his hand to Toy.

"It is ours," Toy said. "We can make a small sun without your help."

He scanned their faces for the last time. Then he turned on his heel and walked silently away.

When Gren walked away from the group, he was blind with defeat. No possible future lay open to him. To be on one's own in the forest was dangerous; here it was doubly dangerous. The possibility existed that he might be able to find other human groups if he could get back to the middle levels of the forest. But those other groups were scarce and shy: and would in self-defence be more likely to kill him than listen to him. Even supposing they accepted him, the idea of fitting in with strangers did not appeal to Gren.

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Nomansland was not the best place in which to walk about blind with defeat. Within five minutes of being outcast, he had fallen victim to a hostile plant.

The ground beneath his feet had shelved down raggedly to a small water course along which water no longer flowed. Boulders taller than Gren lay thickly about, with shingle and the littered small change of pebbles underfoot. Few plants grew here except razor sharp grasses.

As Gren wandered regardlessly on, something fell onto his head—something light and painless.

Several times, Gren had seen and been worried by the dark brainlike fungus that attached itself to other creatures. This discomycete plant form was a mutated morel. Over the ages it had learnt new ways of nourishing and propagating itself.

For some while Gren stood quite still, trembling a little beneath the touch of the thing. Once he raised his hand only to drop it again. His head felt cool, almost numb.

At last he sat down by the nearest boulder, his backbone firm against it, staring in the direction he had come. He was in deep shade, in a clammy place; at the top of the watercourse bank lay a brilliant bar of sunlight, behind which a backdrop of foliage seemed painted in indifferent greens and whites. Gren stared at it listlessly, trying to bring meaning out of the pattern.

Dimly he knew that it would all be there when he was dead—that it would even be a little richer for his death, as the phosphates of his body were reabsorbed by other things: for it seemed unlikely he would Go Up in the manner approved and practised by his ancestors; he had no one to look after his soul. Life was short, and after all, what was he? Nothing!

"You are a human," said a voice. It was the ghost of a voice, an unspoken voice, a voice that had no business with vocal chords. Like a dusty harp, it seemed to twang in some lost attic of his head.

In his present state, Gren felt no surprise. His back was against stone; the shade about him covered not only him; his body was of common material; why should there not be silent voices to match his thoughts?

"Who is that speaking?" he asked idly.

"You call me morel. I shall not leave you. I can help you."

He had a detached suspicion that morel had never used words before, so slowly did they come.

"I need help," he said. "I am an outcast."

"So I see. I have attached myself to you to help you. I shall always be with you."

Gren felt very dull, but he managed, "How will you help me?"

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"As I have helped other beings," said morel. "Once I am with them I never leave them. Many beings have no brain; I am brain. I collect thoughts. I and those of my kind act as brains, so that the creatures we attach ourselves to are more cunning and able than the others."

"Will I be more cunning than other humans?" Gren asked. The sunlight at the top of the watercourse never changed. Everything was mixed in his mind. It was as though he spoke with the gods.

"We have never caught a human before," said the voice, choosing its words more rapidly now. "We morels live only in the margins of nomansland. You live only in the forests. You are a good find. I will make you powerful. You take me everywhere with you."

Giving no answer, Gren rested against the cool stone. He seemed drained of energy. At length the voice twanged in his head again.

"I know much about humans. Time has been terribly long on this world, and on the worlds in space. Once in a very distant time, before the sun was hot, your two-legged kind ruled this world. You were large beings then, five times as tall as you are now. You shrank to meet new conditions, to survive in whatever way you could. In those days, my ancestors were small, and devoured as mushrooms by your kind. But change is always taking place, though so slowly as to go unnoticed. Now you are little creatures in the undergrowth, while I am capable of consuming you."

After listening and thinking, Gren asked, "How can you know all this, morel, if you have not met a human till now?"

"By exploring the structure of your mind. Many of your memories and thoughts are inherited from the far past and buried so that you cannot reach them. But I can reach them. Through them I read the history of your kind's past. My kind could be as great as your kind was. . . ."

All at once a wave of sleep came over Gren. The sleep was fathomless, but full of strange fish—dreams he could not afterwards grasp by their flickering tails.

He woke suddenly. Something had moved nearby.

On the top of the bank, where the bright sun would always shine, stood Poyly.

"Gren, my sweet!" she said, when his slight movement revealed him. "I have left the others to be with you and be your mate."

His brain was clear now, clear and sharp as spring water. Many things were plain to him that had been hidden. He jumped up.

Poyly looked down at him in the shade. With horror she saw the dark fungus growing from him as it had from the snaptrap trees and the killerwillows. It protruded from his hair, it formed a ridge

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down the nape of his neck, it stood like a ruff half way round his collarbone. It glistened darkly in its intricate patterns.

"Gren! The fungus!" she cried in horror, backing away. "It's all over you!"

He climbed out rapidly and caught her by the hand.

"It's all right. The fungus is called morel. It will not hurt us. It can help us."

At first Poyly did not answer. She knew the way in the forest, and in nomansland. Things looked after themselves, not after others. Dimly she guessed that the real purpose of the morel was to feed on others and to propagate itself as widely as possible; and that to this end it might be clever enough to kill its hosts slowly.

"The fungus is bad, Gren," she said.

Gren fell on his knee and pulled her down with him.

"Morel can teach us many things," he said. "We can be so much better than we are. We are poor creatures; surely there's no harm in being better creatures?"

"How can a fungus make us better?"

In Gren's head, morel spoke.

"She surely shall not die. Two heads are better than one. Your eyes shall be opened. Why—you'll be like gods!"

Almost word for word, Gren repeated morel's words to Poyly.

"Perhaps you know best, Gren," she said falteringly. "You were always very clever."

"You can be clever, too," he whispered.

Reluctantly she lay back in his arms, nestling against him.

A slab of the fungus fell from Gren's neck onto her forehead. She stirred and struggled, made as if to protest, then closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were very clear.

Like another Eve, she drew Gren to her. They made love in the warm sunlight, letting their wooden souls fall as they undid their belts.

At last they stood up smiling.

Gren glanced down at their feet. "We've dropped our souls," he said.

She made a careless gesture. "Leave them, Gren. They're only a nuisance. We don't need them any more."

They kissed and stretched and began to think of other things, already completely accustomed to the crown of fungus on their heads.

"We can revenge ourselves on Toy and the others," Poyly said. "They have left open a way back to the forest. Look!"

She led him round a tall tree. A wall of smoke drifted gently inland where flame had bitten a path back to the banyan. Hand in hand, they walked together towards that way out of nomansland, their dangerous Eden.

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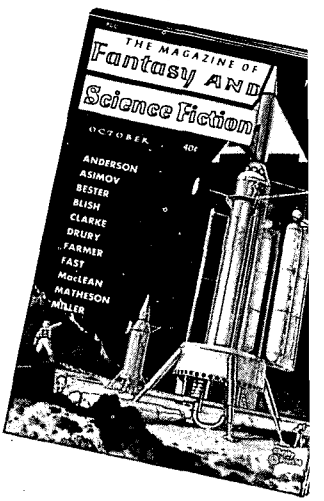

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